

UNCERTAIN GLORY

First of all, we must here adopt
the caution employed by a doctor,
who never takes the patient's pulse
without first assuring that it is
indeed the patient's rather than his
own . . .

Vigilius Haufniensis

(Copenhagen, 1844)

PART ONE

"What do you see?" "I see," Andrenio
said, "the same civil wars two
hundred years from today."

Gracián, Criticón

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Cito uolat, aeterne pungitCastel de Olivo, June 19

My health is excellent, but I'm feeling as cranky as a sickly child.

I can't tell you how much I suffered in a division I couldn't stand. I managed to get myself transferred, arrived here full of hope . . . and everything seemed to go wrong all over again.

I thought I'd find Juli Soleràs. I'd heard he was in the field hospital, sick or wounded, I'm not sure which. But it turns out they'd discharged him. There's not a single familiar face among the thousands the war parades before my eyes in incoherent phantasmagoria.

The lieutenant colonel commanding the first brigade questioned me severely about the reasons for my delay. It was inevitable, given the difference between the date I was told to report and when I actually showed up. And he declared himself satisfied with my simple explanation: a throat infection. But that initial reception hurt my feelings. Maybe I thought they were going to welcome me with open arms. We know nothing about others, nor do we care. On the other hand, we'd like others to know everything about us. Our longing to be understood is only matched by our reluctance to understand anyone else.

Because there's no reason to hide it: I couldn't care less about the people I see here. If at least I disliked them!

Come to think of it, the lieutenant colonel was right to mistrust me. A lieutenant in a front-line unit who transfers to one still being formed where he'll spend God knows how many weeks in the rear could arouse suspicions. In these regular brigades they can't imagine how hellish it is in one of those units made up of escapees from prisons and lunatic asylums and commanded by delirious fanatics. They'd have to live ^{with} it for eleven

months, like I did.

I think of those mules covered with saddle sores and blisters, those gypsy mules whose vast resignation has something in common with a sky at sunset. Day after day bearing that tribe on its wanderings down endless dirt roads, without the slightest hope of a just reward. Who's going to reward a gypsy mule? Posterity?

Life wears us down like saddles against those mules' hides. Sometimes I suspect that the sores life leaves on us will last until we die. Or longer. Those eleven months of hell . . .

It seems they'll assign me to the fourth battalion, which they haven't even begun to organize. Meanwhile, I have to kill time in this town where there's nothing to do. And there are so many things I want to tell you! I feel better writing to you, even if my letters don't arrive! Don't deny it; our family disgusted you as much as me. And you became a monk for the same reason I became an anarchist. Our uncle was right about that.

June 20

When I got up this morning, life seemed worth living again. And all because I've got a corner to myself. They've billeted me in the attic of a peasant's house with an open porch that looks out on some fields. The Parral River glitters amid the fields. I'm right under the roof. Lying in bed, I can look up at the warped reddish rafters--made of pine or savin--and the reed mats laid over them. Through the mats you can see the tiles. The floor has no tiles and creaks when you walk on it. The walls bear signs of the many other officers who've been billeted here during this year of war. The gurls in this town are pretty, I can read scribbled in pencil at the head of my bed. There's a deep thought; I haven't had time to see if it's also true. There are lots of other graffiti, all relating to the village's

female population, but they're not nearly so concise. Some are illustrated with drawings so schematic they look like army maps.

Well, what difference does all that make? Every morning the June sun streams in through the porch, transfiguring everything and bringing with it smells from the fields: cut hay, fresh dung, and others harder to identify. My attic has its own odor. In happier times it ~~had~~² served as a rabbit hutch. I don't mind the lingering smell; on the contrary, it keeps me company.

June 21

I went to Parral del Río, where they'd told me I'd find Juli Soleràs.

It's a hamlet devastated by ~~the~~² war; no one lives there. Not far away there are some trenches and machine gun nests ~~fortified with concrete~~² that his company occupies. But he wasn't there. I was welcomed by the company's captain. He's well over forty and wears a kind of hunting boots. He walks ~~clumsily~~^{stiffly}, grips an S-shaped pipe between his teeth, and his small black eyes, slitty as a Chinaman's, glance at you slyly with a look that cuts right through you while their proprietor tries to ~~look~~^{act} innocent, puffing away on his pipe.

"Is he a friend of yours?"

"We've known each other a long time. We went to high school and college together."

"I'm all for schooling, you know?" He pronounces his S's with a strange lisping sound. He must wear false teeth. "I like college students. That's why I accepted a post as doorman at the university, in the science department. You see, I'd just turned thirty-five: too old to stay in the foreign legion. That's okay for kids who want to get away from their mothers' apron strings. In fact, I'm still suffering the after² effects. Some

of those girls down in Morocco give you something to remember them by.

X Still, one shouldn't talk about oneself; we must be modest. Morocco, let's face it, is a pigsty! They don't know a thing about hygiene or education! Believe me, a position as ^adoorman is preferable."

I'm not making any of this up. He utters the word "position" with great aplomb, not batting an eyelash. Through his false teeth, the word "position" comes out with a lisping rush as from the bill of some waterfowl, if waterfowls could talk. It seems that once he'd been appointed to his position as doorman, he thought it appropriate to "pay a pastoral visit" (in his words) to all the villages and hamlets in Vall d'Aran in search of his first love--which was why he'd laid aside his cassock, for naturally this exemplary life had begun at a seminary. With firm tread, our man set out on the path of learning and matrimony. This was some seven years ago. But I'd come to Parral del Río to find out about Soleràs, not to hear about Captain Picó's remarkable exploits.

"Soleràs? That's a long story. It's not that they demoted him, but he's such a queer bird that you can't trust him as an officer. I put him in charge of our bookkeeping."

"Bookkeeping?"

"Come with me to the pool and I'll explain the whole mystery. After all, if I don't tell you someone else will. Everyone in the brigade knows the story of Roland Cuckolded."

As we chatted, we walked toward the Parral, which flows between three or four rows of ancient poplars. Captain Picó, who as I could see was as much in favor of hygiene as of learning, had made a kind of dam with sacks of clay. The water collects behind it, forming a rather large pool some five or six feet deep. This, in Picó's words, is his "hygienic installation." There were a couple of dozen soldiers in their birthday suits,

sunbathing. When they saw us, they lined up four-deep at attention. The scene was surprising--grotesque, in fact. Picó gravely called the roll. One soldier was missing. He asked where he was. "He's at the infirmary, getting disinfected." (This gunners' company isn't assigned to any battalion and has to use the brigade's medic.) "At ease!" At this shout from their captain, those two dozen Adams without fig leaves dived into the water.

"If I didn't force them at gunpoint, plenty of them wouldn't take a bath in their whole damned lives. Go on, get undressed"--he was already taking his clothes off--"We don't use G-strings here. Quite the opposite. Being embarrassed about our private parts, listen: we'd be even more embarrassed if we didn't have any. I'm trying to stamp out lice and pornographic novels: ✓ the two plagues of war; ✓ Napoleon called them. ✓"

We sunned ourselves on the grass. That's when he told me what had happened with Soleràs.

"A very well-read young man. That's why I wanted him in my company, but filthy as a pig. I don't think he's washed during the whole time he's been here. Threats don't help, and you never know what he'll come out with. He was in charge of a nest that was some distance from the others. He's lazy and hadn't bothered to hang bells on the wires. One foggy night, the others cut the wires with pruning shears. Early the next morning, they mounted a surprise attack. Our soldiers panicked and ran, leaving Soleràs all alone. He's nearsighted but he can fight like a tiger. He sat down behind one of the guns and began picking off fascists."

"All by himself?"

"With his orderly and a couple of guys assigned to that gun. The ones who'd run away straggled back, he beat off the attack, and I'd written a report urging his promotion to lieutenant. Now get this: there was a second attack, the soldiers stood their ground, and this time it was

Soleràs who left them in the lurch."

"What do you mean?"

"After searching and searching, they found him hours later hiding in a cave. He was reading a pornographic novel he hastily slipped into his pocket."

"Then how do you know it was pornographic?"

"On account of the saint. There's a saint on the cover. There are saints in that book. And besides, everyone in this brigade knows it: Roland Cuckolded! Some of them know it by heart! You can imagine . . . We really should have shot him, but who's got the heart? Promote him first and then shoot him? Such a well-educated guy . . ."

Parral del Río is about five miles from Castel de Olivo: a delightful stroll along the river. I felt happy in that silence, in that solitude. It took me fifteen minutes to reach the farms on the outskirts of town. I sat down under an enormous walnut tree, the biggest I've ever seen, and began to eat nuts. They're not ripe yet, and they ^{stained} left my fingers ~~stained~~ yellow and ^{impregnating them with their} ~~impregnated with that~~ bitter medicinal smell. The pleasure was precisely this: tasting all nature's medicinal bitterness.

Night was falling. An oriole sang, hidden by the walnut tree's thick foliage. Sometimes I caught sight of him in a flash of yellow. Poking his head above the water, a frog cautiously rehearsed his single note. Feathery swamp grass swayed in the breeze, and Venus, on the horizon, looked like one of those glass tears on the cheeks of baroque Madonnas. But Castel de Olivo is no baroque paradise lost. These landscapes in lower Aragon are lost but not baroque. Since I've ^{never} ~~been~~ been here before, it's all quite new to me. Despite what people think, they're entirely different from Castile, where I spent these last eleven months. At first I kept getting lost till I realized that these landscapes belong not to space but to time. They are

instants rather than landscapes. You have to look out on them as though you were looking at an instant: a fleeting instant you suddenly meet face to face.

Once you've discovered their secret, you wouldn't trade them for anything on earth.

#

Soleràs can be very odd. I certainly wasn't surprised by that story about Roland Cuckolded. In fact, I was disappointed. I was expecting something more bizarre.

When we were in our last year of high school, it was already impossible to guess his age. I suspect he didn't get along with his family. This was one of the things that drew us together. First of all, who was his family? A mystery. Perhaps an elderly aunt and no one else. He always avoided the subject. As far as I can remember, he never mentioned any other relative. An old maiden aunt who sees visions: Saint Philomena appears and speaks to her (in Castilian, no less). I'm not even sure exactly where he lived; I have the feeling he was embarrassed. Embarrassed about what? His aunt must be rich, since to celebrate his high school graduation she paid for a grand tour: Germany, Russia, Hungary, and Bulgaria. He chose those countries, skipping England, France, and Italy. He wanted to go places where no one else had been. He was the same way with his readings: Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Kirkegart (I'm not sure if that's the right spelling). I don't know if anyone except him every had the patience to slog through them.

Besides, why would he be ashamed of his aunt when he'd always had a weakness for eccentrics? It was he who initiated me into the mysteries of spiritualism, theosophy, Freud, existentialism, surrealism, and anarchism. Some of these things still seemed new when we graduated from high

X school in 1928, almost ten years ago. He always said Marxism wasn't worth the trouble: a total bore, sheer vulgarity. "No imagination," he's say. "Don't trust ^{people} ~~anyone~~ with no imagination. They'll bore you to tears." On the other hand, he was fascinated by sexual perversion. He knew all kinds of case histories and every time he discovered a new one he felt as excited as a collector who's found a hitherto-unknown specimen.

X Since his visionary aunt, moreover, wasn't stingy ^I ~~with her money~~, he could smoke and drink up a storm: something else that greatly enhanced his status in our eyes when we were sixteen ^I ~~years old~~. He even tried to ^{persuade} ~~convince~~ us that he frequented houses of ill repute and injected morphine, but it was easy to see he was just trying to impress us.

It was he who introduced me to Trini's family: her parents, both schoolteachers; a brother, studying to be a chemist. All anarchists. They lived in a dingy tenement on Hospital Street. The living room was papered in a depressing oxblood red. There were four rocking chairs and a black coffee table with a white marble top. When there were more than four people some had to sit on a divan, which also served as Trini's bed since the apartment was very cramped. What I noticed most were the framed prints on the walls, especially an allegorical representation of the federal republic, with a photo of Pi i Maragall in his Phrygian cap between two busty matrons: Helvetia and America. It was from the time of Trini's grandfather: a lifelong federalist. I'd never seen such a place, and all these things, which were new to me, amused me. I'm sure they amused Soleràs for the same reason.

Tuesday, June 22

X Speaking of prints, I'm obsessed ^{by} ~~with~~ one the lady of the house where I'm billeted has in her dining room. It's an engraving, apparently

from the beginning of the last century, and depicts a Mater Dolorosa, precisely a baroque one with a huge tear on each cheek and seven daggers in her heart.

"You stare at that print a lot," the lady said today as she served me lunch. Though over forty, she's blond, plump, and fresh-cheeked. She'd worked as a servant for many years in Barcelona and speaks better Catalan than many of us do. "Didn't you ever see a Virgin with seven daggers? She's the Virgin of Olivet, worshipped all around here. She's especially helpful with troubled marriages, family problems . . ."

She sighed, glancing at me out of the corner of her eye.

"All the women in these parts have those seven daggers stuck in their hearts. This isn't living! Poor Virgin of Olivet! They couldn't even leave her alone. God knows where she is now! And I'd like to be far away too."

"Don't you like it here?"

"Listen: there's nothing like Barcelona. I miss the days when I was working there, all those young people on Sunday afternoons, those happy songs . . . Don't you know the one about the fountain and bright-eyed Marieta?"

She started singing, I joined in, and the two of us burst into a chorus of

Coming back from the fountain,

a pretty, pretty maiden . . .

but when we finished that silly song, there were tears in her eyes.

"But here you're the boss."

"Of a few feet of dirt. I'll take Barcelona any time. Here everything's filthy and gloomy. You'll see. And I'm not the only one who thinks so; every girl who's worked in Barcelona agrees with me. There are four of

us. Would you believe we speak Catalan when we're together? It makes us feel young again."

"Don't you think you're overdoing it?"

"Bah! When you see the women around here eating standing up because sitting at a table is for men only. They can't drink wine in front of any man except their husbands."

"Are you kidding?"

"I'm not. Ask the other soldiers; they've been here for months. They kept making fools of themselves at first, waiting for the women to sit down before they began to eat! To ask a woman to sit down is the same as saying she's a . . ."

"Thanks for warning me. It takes all kinds to make a world."

"Yes, but the worst thing is the filth. Any woman who bathes is considered a slut, and around here it's only sluts who take baths. There was one girl, years ago, around my age or a little older, who ^{was} also ^{been} a servant in Barcelona. She ^{came} ~~to~~ home for the village festival and to spend a few days with her parents. It was August, it was hot, and she was covered with soot from the train. She thought the washtub would do just fine for a bath in the kitchen. Her mother comes in, sees her, takes a big club and smashes the tub to pieces. Her father was napping; his name's Cagorcio. ^{*}He hears the ruckus, comes out of the barn, and you know what he does? He curses his daughter and throws her out of the house."

"Christ, but wasn't everyone in town against him?"

"Everyone in town? You want to know what they said? 'Damn, that Cagorcio's a real man with hair on his chest!'"

"And what's this model father doing now?"

"He's a volunteer . . . ^{for} the other side."

"And the girl?"

"It's a long story, and what good would it do? For the time being, she went back to Barcelona, to the place where she was working. Afterward . . . there were lots of rumors, but we haven't seen her in Castel de Olivo since. She lives in another village, Olivet de la Virgen"-- and she pointed to the engraving with the Madonna. I had the feeling she was hiding some important fact about Cagorcio's daughter, but after all, what difference does all this nonsense make to me?

This woman must be at least partly right. Today I saw a surprising sight: girls harvesting oats. Under the blazing sun, with their blouses half-unbuttoned, dripping sweat. I thought it must be because the men were at war, but no: there's been no draft around here, and the only men from this village in the army are volunteers--not many and in enemy territory, like Cagorcio. You should realize that here they call us Catalans, "los catalanes," not ~~Republicans~~. So which side people are on has nothing to do with what people think in Barcelona (supposing people in Barcelona think something coherent) but according to how they feel about Catalonia. It surprises everyone at first, but that's how it is. Anyway, the women were reaping because they always have. The lady of the house also told me they do the threshing, bring in the grapes, collect manure. And they'd be pretty if the sun and hard work didn't wither them before their time. And the filth . . . At twenty they already look old. A lot of them are blond and blue-eyed. You can see there's plenty of Germanic blood in this area.

Soleràs has also disappeared, like Cagorcio's daughter. When I think I joined this brigade to have a friend nearby. I'm even starting to think he's avoiding me, since I never can find him.

Tuesday the 23rd

He came to visit me in the house where I'm staying. About time!

Skinny, sallow, beardless, nearsighted: the same old Soleràs. I rose from my chair to embrace him, but after glancing at me mistrustfully, he growled, "Take it easy. No reason to make a fuss."

I told him I'd joined this brigade to be with him.

X "Bah! You'll end up despising me like all the rest! No one here can stand me, from the ~~brigade's~~ commander down to the lowliest trench-louse."

His voice is the same: a deep voice, bass, which sometimes--especially when he's pulling your leg--takes on oratorical overtones.

"I consider you my best friend."

"Well listen, I actually came to tell you we shouldn't see each other. I know you've been looking for me. It's utterly idiotic."

"And why is it idiotic?"

"Precisely because I'm your best friend."

He laughed as he said it--that cackling laugh of his that makes you think of a clucking hen.

"You want me to hate you, Juli," I said, a bit disconcerted by his doubletalk. "I don't understand why you're so eager. Is this some new fad of yours?"

"Poor Lluís, if only you knew . . . I'm a staff sergeant. Do you know what a staff sergeant is? No; you don't know. I didn't know either until they made me one. We haven't the faintest idea of militariology even though we've been up to our eyeballs in it for eleven months. A staff sergeant is . . . how shall I put it? Like a kind of grocer's clerk. Is this why we joined the army? I'm in charge of doling out chickpeas."

X2 "I ~~knew~~ ^{know} all about it. I ~~can't deny that~~ ^{must admit} it's pretty strange."

"Did Picó tell you? A very practical guy, that Picó! If you only knew how much practical guys get on my nerves . . . They run the world, and

I've never given a damn about the world. Hmmm . . . Practical guys! They can't understand that you leave when you feel like leaving! Why should I have stayed there when I'd lost interest? Would you read the same novel twice? An emotion loses intensity every time it's repeated. Repetition is tedious. There are exceptions, of course, honorable exceptions. It's like grammar. Before i or e we always write g, with honorable exceptions like Jehovà, Jesús, or Jeremias."

"You think you're hilarious, as usual."

"When I was twelve, my aunt took me to spend the summer in Godella, where she has some property. There's a cave with stalactites, and she wanted me to think they were just wonderful. By that time, naturally, I'd already learned to cultivate a refined variety of hypocrisy, so in front of her I displayed boundless admiration for stalactites and an equally boundless one for stalagmites. But what I really liked ^{were} ~~was~~ the railroad tracks. I'd spend hours contemplating them! I couldn't resist the temptation, even though I realized that it would be most laudable to do so. I dug a hole between two crossties, not very deep, just enough to curl up with my head a little lower than the ties. I'm sure you get the idea: I wanted to lie there while the express went ^{over me} ~~by~~ (and since it doesn't stop at Godella, it whips by at full speed). To feel a whole express train roaring over you! Some years later, I came across the same ^{stunt} ~~trick~~ in The Brothers Karamazov, but don't accuse me of plagiarism! I assure you that at twelve I hadn't read Dostoevsky yet. It was Bossuet's Funeral Sermons that my aunt shoved down my throat. And besides, this express game is pretty common. I know so many people who tried it at that age: the age of innocence! I've known so many . . . It's so hard to find a new twist, something thousands of other people haven't done! I felt the express roar over me; now that was an emotion! Even though, to be frank, the essential

ingredient was missing. The essential ingredient of an emotion, you know: to see it reflected in someone else's eyes. This is one of our weak points: that a feeling, to be real, needs an accomplice. I wanted to bring Nati along. I never mentioned her to you? Twelve, just like me, but what a twelve-year-old! Lanky, dark, smooth-skinned, and smelling of warm hay. . . and that brazen stare which means innocence when it's combined with unselfconscious vitality. She was the daughter of the peasants who worked my aunt's farm, born and raised in Godella. I don't think she'd ever been away. I got her to come along and watch me climb in that hole and let the express go over me. But climb in with me? She was scared stiff. 'That's the whole idea,' I kept telling her, 'to feel scared.' If I told you what a delightful sensation it is . . . but what's the point of feeling it by yourself? Impossible; she refused, and she smelled like new-mown hay . . . and those eyes . . . As long as there are eyes on earth, the human race will never get tired of acting like Adam and Eve. What did I tell you: honorable exceptions, things worth repeating for saecula saeculorum till the kingdom come. On the other hand, I don't see that war is one of them. You might enjoy the first battle for its novelty, the second one's still okay, but after you've been in a few . . . There are some deplorably vulgar aspects that, after a while, start annoying you."

"What are you talking about?"

X "My orderly was shot down as he was bringing me a canteen full of coffee and rum. I need a whole canteen of coffee and rum at moments like that. The ^g coffee spilled onto the ground, mixed with that jerk's blood. He was a poor kid, born in Pobla de Lillet. His family had a dairy store on the Plaça del Pi. They'd wounded him, you see? Isn't that nice? A casualty, with a head wound received in the line of duty. Gloriously and heroically wounded! Later, in the rear, you can tell your best friend's wife

X (your best friend's whoever has the nicest wife), He was wounded in
X such-and-such a battle, as I advanced holding our flag aloft . . . In the
rear you can get away with telling how you advanced with a flag, since
X those ~~idiots~~ ^{fools} still think that's how battles are fought. You can even say
you were on horseback with a sword in your other hand; they'll swallow
anything--or pretend to as long as you don't ask them to get too close.
But poor Palaudàries's Mauser wound was in one of the cheeks of his ass.
Now how are you going to tell your best friend's wife about that? No
matter what euphemism you employ--rear end, for example--it still sounds
ridiculous. And why should I care? I don't gave a damn. In cases like this,
I prefer to walk away. I can't stand the sight of blood, it makes me feel
like throwing up. Two soldiers had pulled his pants down and were trying
to staunch the bleeding with handfuls of grass. He was reciting a
paternoster and calling ~~out~~ ^I for his mother. How could he expect her to
come when she was selling milk ~~in~~ ^{at} the Plaça del Pi? I repeat: the bullet
had gone through one of the cheeks of his ass, so the wound wasn't
serious, but the sight of that blood oozing out made me feel like puking.
I'll take the mummies any day! So dry they can't even remember that
repulsive substance we call blood! Those mummies are a joy to behold. I
X recommend that you go on an ~~excursion~~ ^{expedition} to the monastery in Olivet de la
Virgen . . ."

"Picó said they found you hiding in a cave."

"Humph! Reading an erotic novel, right? I can see you've heard all
about my exploits. Well, not everyone who wants to can be a legend.
Palaudàries, for example, will never be a legend no matter how hard he
tries, no matter how many bullets go through his butt."

"So the part about the book wasn't true?"

"That would be a first; all legends are true. I'd started it the day

before and wanted to see how it ended. Some novels have surprise endings.

I can lend it to you."

"No thanks. I'm not interested."

"You don't know what you're missing. It's the gospel in this brigade. Everyone's read Roland Cuckolded. It helped me to understand many things; you'd learn something from it too. You might even learn something about yourself, something important for you to know."

"Like what?"

Faced with this question, he stared at me for a while with his nearsighted gaze (he's too vain to wear glasses). Then he sighed.

"Sometimes I wonder," he muttered through his teeth, "if the whole bunch of you aren't off your rockers. What difference does that make? Something! Anything! To understand!"

"And what's the use of understanding?"

"I can see that . . . I can see that . . . no doubt about it, you've never tried anything. And there are so many things worth trying! For example, lying on the grass, if possible during a heat wave, at evening, when the grass, warmed all day by the sun, smells like a peasant girl's armpit. To lie down one evening at the beginning of August, when Scorpio drags its endless tail across the horizon"--his bass voice was taking on oratorical resonances--"Scorpio! I'll tell you a secret: it's my favorite constellation. That stiff tail, full of venom, above the universe . . . That's what we need: tails like Scorpio's, capable of poisoning the entire universe. Don't look at me like that. You know I'm right. A tail like that would be a legitimate source of pride for the whole family. I'm referring to the family of man. But since we don't have tails, our sole recourse is to lie on our backs and . . . Straight up in the air, with all our might! But it comes back and hits you in the face. Newton would say it was the

law of gravity. Let him rave; he was too dumb to look further, to really understand. That's understanding: to receive, right between the eyes, unflinching, your own impotent spit; to feel all the cold fury of our vast, hopeless impotence."

"As if it were all a lousy trick."

"Everything's a trick, if you prefer to put it that way: obscene and macabre. Listen, Lluís: do you think you were born differently from everyone else? And aren't you going to end up like all the others: a revolting, putrid mess? You're old enough to know: obscene entrance, macabre exit. They let you in for free, but they beat you up on the way out. Believe me: it's worth ~~the trouble~~ ^{it} letting fly a big gob of spit with all your might ~~and fury~~ while you still have time. If that was the best that could be done, what was the point?"

"The best that could be done by whom?"

He looked at me in amazement, as if astonished at my lack of intelligence.

"You'll do what . . . you're old enough . . . Yes, you just don't want to understand. Maybe you like this world; perhaps you feel right at home here; perhaps you've never felt like an outsider. Perhaps you just live your life, like so many other morons. Perhaps I'm the only one living God knows whose life, a life that doesn't ~~suit~~ ^{fit} me, that has nothing to do with me."

"Juli, the feeling you're talking about is one I've had too and I don't think it's so abnormal. It's much more common than you think. We're not living life. It's life that lives us. And life . . . It's better not to worry about it. What's the point? Life is so beautiful! Is that an impenetrable mystery? Well, mystery always enhances beauty: everyone knows that. Like sadness. A sad, mysterious beauty: what could be more fascinating? I feel

sad about some things too, Juli, but I manage to keep it to myself."

There was a moment of silence, which he broke with his cackling laugh.

"I suppose Picó took you for a swim at his hygienic installation, as he calls it. He's so proud of that place. A very practical guy, there's no denying it. And with a set of corns that are remarkable in more than one respect."

I must admit that the captain's corns had caught my eye: six or seven on each foot, big and hard.

"Why doesn't he have them removed?"

"Oof! You don't know him. Cruells tried it once. Cruells is a paramedic who hangs around this brigade. You'll run into him sooner or later. He wanted to cut them off with a razor blade. 'Get away from me!' Picó shouted. 'I'd rather keep my corns!' And we couldn't get him to change his mind. We'd have had to grab him and hold him down, and trying to cut corns off a guy who's struggling and kicking . . ."

"I thought he was brave."

"I'm not saying he's not. One time we were being shelled and the gunners had calculated the parallaxes and square roots and all that stuff so precisely that the shells fell right in our trench. Picó said it himself, 'Those fascists have class!' It was annoying, I must admit, and at the time we had a young second lieutenant, a certain Vilaró, who'd just arrived at the front. Picó never let him out of his sight, because if he lit out the soldiers would follow him and it was easy to see he was getting jumpy. He kept glancing over his shoulder all the time. Picó took out his false teeth (he always takes them out at supreme moments), dropped them in a glass of water, and climbed up on the parapet. Without his false teeth he looks a lot like Voltaire. He paced back and forth on the sacks of earth, with

that walk he has as if he'd just put on a new pair of shoes, which is on account of his corns. He'd left the glass with the teeth on top of one of the sacks. A burst of machine-gun fire smashed the glass to smithereens. The soldiers snickered and winked at each other, glancing toward Vilaró. 'You think I'm ~~too~~ scared to do the same?' He jumped onto the parapet. A shell took his head off just as he was about to add something. Maybe it wasn't much of a loss; maybe he was about to say 'Shit!' like so many other heroes. If you want to get Picó mad, mention all this to him. He knows he's morally responsible for that poor guy's death."

But how
"Man! ~~How~~ could he have known that . . .?"

"It was predictable. Picó's lucky, he knows it, and he takes advantage of it. You could see from Vilaró's face that he was just the opposite. You could tell he was a loser from a mile away."

"Stop talking like a fool and let the dead rest in peace."

"The dead in peace? What more could they ask for? You really ought to visit the monastery in Olivet . . . As for the false teeth, they turned up quite a way from the trench. Fortunately, they were still intact. I'll tell you something: I find Picó's false teeth far more macabre than those mummies in Olivet. This attic of yours is remarkable in more than one respect. I'd like to live here. You always have all the luck. You always end up with what I'd like to have. I would have enjoyed being in an anarchist brigade made up of escapees from lunatic asylums like the ones you talk about. Our brigade is as boring as can be! Order, hygiene, and culture! But you . . . an attic like this, with this smell of rabbits . . ."

He peered at the drawings on the wall.

"Hmmm, not bad, but they could be better. It depresses me how little imagination the guys in this brigade have. When you leave Castel, I'll ask to be billeted in this attic."

Olivel de la Virgen, July 4, Sunday

This village is where we're supposed to organize the brigade's fourth battalion.

There was only one small problem: we had to take it from the anarchists. And who had to take Olivel from the anarchists? On paper, the fourth battalion. In reality, since the recruits still haven't arrived, it was Major Rosich (who was scared to death!), with his Ford and chauffeur; Doctor Puig, the head medic; the paramedic, who looks about twenty years old and who I suppose is Cruells since I think Soleràs mentioned him in Castel de Olivo; four infantry lieutenants, one of whom answers to the name of "Gallart" and was a waiter in a café before the war; and finally ~~half a dozen~~ ^{a half-dozen} second lieutenants, among whom I have the honor to be counted. In all, "eleven people and a chauffeur." The phrase stuck; it was something Doctor Puig blurted out.

We climbed in the major's car, a prodigious Ford. Those who couldn't fit inside were on the running board. One of the second lieutenants sat on the roof with a repeating rifle between his legs. Our flag flew above the radiator. The road from Castel to Olivel is hardly more than a ~~path for~~ ^{pair of} ~~cuts~~ ^{cuts} carts, running due north for about five miles. The Ford crossed the gullies on a pair of boards we'd brought along for this purpose and that we kept laying down and picking up. The officer with the repeating rifle laughed, sang, and cursed, having the time of his life. He's short and skinny. Suddenly he looked at me and shouted, "Hey you: what did you ~~used to~~ ^{do} do for a living?"

"Are you talking to me? I have a degree in law, but I ~~didn't~~ ^{d've never} practice."

"What's a degree in law?"

"That means I'm a lawyer."

"A lawyer! Put her there, fella! Practically the same as me!"

"You worked in a court?"

"No. I was a public orator."

At that point we caught sight of the fields on the outskirts of town and decided it would be more prudent to get out of the Ford and creep forward, darting from one haystack to another, our pistols drawn in case the anarchists tried anything. Later we found out they'd decamped the day before as soon as they'd heard troops were coming. The whole village, on the other hand, turned out to welcome us: men, women, and children. The girls stuck roses in the buttonholes in our lapels. It's nice being a hero when you don't have to risk your life. Major Rosich's eyes were sparkling. A middle-aged man embraced him. It was the mayor, deposed by the anarchists. He'd been hiding in the woods ever since. The major reinstated him on the spot. The men clapped and cheered; the old ladies wept; more roses in buttonholes. The temptation was too strong. The major delivered the speech we'd been dreading (it's one of his weaknesses).

The old ladies wiped their eyes on corners of their black aprons. Meanwhile the kids, of whom there was a big swarm, came to admire the stripes on our jackets.

This village, if I'm not mistaken, is the one Soleràs alluded to so mysteriously. My hostess in Castel had also mentioned it. She told me about the Mater Dolorosa; Soleràs talked about mummies and a monastery. Maybe I'll be able to kill a few hours visiting it, if it really exists. Our stay looks like it's going to be boring. The village--like all the others around here--is strictly a one-horse town. It's got 280 buildings, between houses and barns, plus a hundred fields with their haystacks. The church is made of bricks, as is the castle that stands above the village. The

bricks have turned black with the passing centuries. The flies drive us crazy, especially at lunchtime. There are many more than in Castel, which is saying a lot. And it could hardly be otherwise, given the amount of dung lying around the barnyards.

Before leaving Castel, I tried to visit Soleràs. A soldier at the commissary said he'd just been sent to the transport section and he'd seen him set out in a truck that morning. He could have come and said goodbye. Bah; I don't know why I bother worrying about him!

The worst of it is that I miss his company. His conversation sometimes gets on my nerves but it's always interesting. I remember one piece of nonsense he said in Castel de Olivo: "Eunuchs, seeing what fools we make of ourselves, could justifiably feel superior. The same is true of skeptics like you." It made me indignant to hear him compare me to a eunuch, and yet . . . Besides, I'm so sick of all these officers, especially the major and the doctor, who spent all their time going from one wine cellar to another, tasting the contents of each barrel to see if they're fit to drink.

July 8

We're still hanging around waiting for the recruits to arrive. We've already organized our future companies. I'm in the fourth, under Captain Gallart, the ex-waiter.

This place couldn't be drabber. It's in a depression so you don't see it till you're here. The village limits cover a wide area, mostly uninhabited and untilled. Big olive groves justify its name. The monastery, they tell me, is quite far downstream. I take long walks. Sometimes I sit down beneath an olive tree and stay so still that crows alight on the ground a few steps away. There are hundreds of them, and they keep me company.

In the distance, some rocky mountains mark the village limits. Sometimes a cloud hovers over them: rock and cloud, permanence and evanescence. The cloud passes, but it looks so splendid in the changing light ^{at} of sunset. The rock's always the same. What's rock and what's cloud in our lives, and which is more important? What part of us is immutable? And can we be sure it's more valuable than the other, ^{that's} ~~what's~~ constantly changing? Or are we nothing but ghosts, clouds whose only hope is to experience a glorious moment, a single moment, and then vanish?

All our instincts rebel against this idea. "I feel and experience immortality," Spinoza wrote. I learned this quote from Soleràs. Who else would be willing to ^{slog} ~~plod~~ through Spinoza? And the immensity of our longing: how can you explain that mystery? How can you explain this immense longing we feel without knowing what we long for?

Everything has an explanation, if we know how to find it. For example, these crows, whose ^{numbers} ~~abundance~~ so intrigued me. On one of my aimless strolls, I suddenly found myself surrounded by a circle of lunar mountains. An extraordinary spot, like a kind of crater, wide, deep, and enigmatic. The sun was setting, and its oblique rays lent the scene an extraterrestrial aspect. Not a single tree or shrub, everything mineral--and the play of light and shadow as stark as in outer space. It was fascinating. I approached the crater's rim and peered down into it. A huge pile of bones cleared up the mystery. It's where they throw dead animals: the buitrera, they call it. There are more shepherds than peasants around here: shepherds and goatherds. This is where they throw ^I ~~the~~ animals who've died of disease. When a mule is sick and the veterinarian says there's no hope for it, they don't wait for it to die. It weighs too much. Beating it, they make it walk to the buitrera under its own steam and then push it over the side. The mule falls in and, if it's lucky, dies when

it hits the bottom. Sometimes, of course, it holds out for a few days. The crows and vultures are in charge of keeping the buitrera clean, and I must say they do a good job. Nothing could be cleaner than these smooth, white bones. Ossa arida: I can't remember which prophet describes a vast desert strewn with bones. Human ones, of course, but what difference does that make? That buitrera penetrated deep inside me. The dryness of those bones made me vaguely thirsty, and I recalled Soleràs's words, "An immense thirst, a drop of water to quench it, that's the whole story: infinitely vast and infinitely tiny. I don't know if you've heard of atoms . . ." "Excuse me," I interrupted him, "but don't try to kid me. Atoms are bullshit."

The dryness of those bones made me understand what that "immense thirst" really was. "I must live," I thought. "I have to hurry up and live before my bones are tossed into the bottomless buitrera that awaits us. I must live, but how does one go about living? A year of war, a year without a woman, and we have so few years to live! I've probably already used up more than a third of my allotment . . ."

One evening, I was at a particularly deserted crossroad: I mean strikingly deserted; you could feel the desert in it. There was a cloud, and its flaming colors were so silent that it was terrifying. Beauty is terrifying. Fortunately, we rarely run across it. In a dusk like that one--
~~we~~ ^{live} never seen such stunning sunsets ~~before~~ ^{one} feels all alone in the universe, like a prisoner before a court from which there is no appeal. What are we accused of? Of being so small, petty, and vile. Immensity judges and crushes us . . . I was so wrapped up in my thoughts that I didn't hear her footsteps. I didn't notice her presence till that voice, serious and distant, roused me from my ponderings.

"Good evening."

It was a woman with a little boy holding her arm and another

clinging to her skirts. A tall, fine figure of a woman, in mourning, and she walked by without looking at me. A kind of aura of grief surrounded her as she set off down the path, outlined against the setting sun, slowly. Who was she? I'd never seen her in the village. When ^{she} ~~she'd~~ turned and was out of sight, I suddenly realized that she'd greeted me in Catalan. A Catalan living in this village? A mystery; I'm almost ready to believe it was a hallucination.

July 15

The recruits have started arriving. I'm now in charge of instructing these poor kids. I'm spending more time in the village, getting to know the streets and people.

I still haven't identified Olivet's Dolorosa: I mean the apparition the other day. A hallucination? Anything's possible.

Since the village is at the bottom of a sort of dip, the only thing you can see from a distance is the castle. You don't see the houses till you're here. If it's evening, you see old women sitting on stone doorsteps, enjoying the cool air. They remind me of magpies because they're always chattering and dressed in black. When you come across the village suddenly, it seems dirty and brutish.

The major has us give talks to the recruits--not each officer to his men but to the entire battalion.

For this, we use the castle's great hall, and so I've had a chance to see what it's like inside: a rundown old manor house. The hall is enormous, and the major's placed a table on a platform. He presides, seated, while the officer whose turn it is talks standing up.

Major Rosich is short and chubby, with ^{a dash olive complexion} ~~yellowish~~ dark skin and ^{charming} ~~very~~ black eyes, demonstrative and vivacious. A ^{lovely} person if he didn't drink

so much. I've already given my first lecture: "Machine Guns Must Be Placed on Level Ground." As I elaborated on my point--the advantages of crossfire and direct fire, etc., I watched his eyes light up like hot coals in the wind. With a piece of chalk and an improvised blackboard, I was demonstrating the trigonometric principles of machine gun trajectories when he suddenly stood up and, with tears in his eyes, embraced me in front of everybody.

"Calculations like these are the glory of our battalion!"

X
X
I must admit I'm far from understanding the causes of this ~~emotional~~ ^{emotional} outburst, but I've always had a soft spot for ~~passionate~~ ^{passionate} types. For this reason, I'm even starting to get along with Ponsetti, the "public orator." It turns out he sold snake oil or something of the sort. He's always palling around with Captain Gallart, who of course is gigantic: tall and fat, red-faced, gluttonous, very jolly. My passionate love of tradition fills me with respect for this pair [^] one tall and fat and the other short and skinny [^] as sentimental and boozy as the other: the major and the doctor.

X
2X
X
I found a big pine grove, north of the village and not far away. Thousands of cicadas buzz away ~~there~~ ^{there} at midday. The pines are tall and slender, and their crowns aren't thick enough to keep the sunlight from ~~streaming~~ ^{streaming} shining through and warming the earth. The air is permeated ^{by} with the smell of resin, tart and invigorating. I lie down on the needles, which make a warm, ~~soft~~ ^{soft} bed, and abandon myself to the sadness that comes over me in fits. Poor Soleràs, who thinks he's the only one. When, when, have I lived my own life?

Thursday, August 5

X
X
Teaching the recruits takes very little time, so ~~that~~ ^{that} except when I'm on guard duty I ~~still~~ ^{still} have hours and hours to myself. Ponsetti's also been

assigned to the fourth company. He and Gallart never leave the village and rarely stir outside a certain tavern where a redhead named Melitona works. They're both nuts about her. Major Rosich and Doctor Puig are drunk most days. The other first and second lieutenants also stay in the village, chasing skirts--the same girls who stuck those roses in our lapels.

That leaves Cruells, the paramedic. It turns out he adores Baudelaire. He knows lots of his poems by heart, avoids women, wine, and curse words--a rara avis! Sometimes he comes with me on my walks. Not very often, because he has to stick by his post. Four hundred recruits are a lot of guys, and when it's not one thing it's another, usually in the venereal category. He's the baby in our battalion (just turned twenty), and when he comes with me he brings along a kind of portable telescope, or perhaps it's more like one of those spyglasses sea captains used in the last century. Assembled, it's about four feet long. He says his aunt gave it to him for his twelfth birthday and he's had it with him ever since the war began. Disassembled, it doesn't take up much space--the pieces fit inside each other. It's much more powerful than my field glasses. Since our walks last until well after sundown, he showed me how to gaze at Jupiter through his telescope. I could see Galileo's four moons perfectly, like four peas around a plum, three on the left and one on the right. The next day this last one had disappeared. The day after that only two were visible. Then all four of them reappeared; now there are two on the right and two on the left. He explained the causes of these appearances and disappearances, of the phases of Venus--which can also be seen through his spyglass--and lots of other things. He's as knowledgeable as I'm ignorant about astronomy.

We were taking an afternoon nap in that pine grove. In the distance, through the trunks, we could see the castle. Don't imagine a medieval

castle with turrets and battlements; it's simply a square mass of blackened bricks. The village, in its little valley, is invisible from the grove. Suddenly I asked him, "What did you do before the war?"

Half asleep, he blinked at me through those glasses with tortoise-shell frames that make him look like a wise owl and a kindly soul. He seemed to hesitate.

"I'll tell you, but don't spread it around. I was a seminarian."

"A seminarian?"

X It would never have occurred to me, and yet now it ^{seems} ~~seemed~~ plain as day. Why shouldn't Cruells have been a seminarian? Or rather, how could he have been anything else?

"And what will you do after the war?"

"Finish my studies."

A few days later, Cruells gave me another surprise. At night, of course, we assign some soldiers to guard duty under the officer whose turn it is, and they patrol the village till dawn. I was off that night, and the guy in charge was a second lieutenant from the second company who told me ^{on} ~~at~~ about it. It must have been about one in the morning. The village was sleeping peacefully, it was a moonless night, and the only sound was the hooting of an owl in a poplar near the fountain when all of a sudden the soldiers spotted a man in a field outside town. It was a soldier ~~pointing at them with~~ ^{aiming} a gun that, from a distance, looked like a 50-caliber mortar. Naturally, they sounded the alarm, thinking it was a fascist or anarchist leading a surprise attack. Fortunately, the officer in charge stayed calm and kept his men from firing their Mausers. It was Cruells with his telescope. His eyes were shut, he was fast asleep, and he was wandering around with his spyglass, acting as if he were aiming it. Later, he told us he'd sleepwalked before, but not for many years. We asked

X

X Doctor Puig if sleepwalking was dangerous. He shrugged his shoulders, said it was of no importance and ~~wasn't~~^{not} very well understood, that some people sleepwalk once and never do it again, that attacks are more common in adolescence ("let's not kid ourselves; at twenty, Cruells is still an adolescent"), and that "in any case, there's no use worrying about it since in all self-respecting brigades, according to reliable statistics, there are 463 cases of gonorrhea for every one of sleepwalking."

X The days Cruells is on duty, which is most of the time, I go out by myself. I now have a horse, extremely convenient for promeneurs solitaires. A man on foot looks like a crank; on horseback, everyone respects him. Besides, with a horse, or more exactly with a mare, I can ~~wander~~^{venture} farther afield: to the monastery, for example.

But I should explain things in order.

In the first place, I tracked down the hallucination, thanks to my theoretical-practical lectures.

It turns out that the lord of the castle was murdered by the anarchists. There's nothing unusual about that, of course; in fact, it would be strange if it were otherwise. Well, he was living with a woman. If she'd been his wife, they'd have killed her too without the slightest hesitation. But it was a case of "free love." Not only didn't they kill her, but they treated her with the greatest respect and considered her mistress of the castle and its estates. She still lives there with a couple of children. The old ladies sarcastically call her "her ladyship" and assure me that as soon as the war's over, some distant cousins of the deceased, his only known relatives, will throw her out of the castle.

"Her and her two bastards."

She lives in seclusion, avoiding people. When the major asked to use her hall, she immediately agreed. But she shuts herself up with her

children while the talks are being given.

X I learned that she had a mare in her stable that the former lord had used. No one rode it, since no one in the village or battalion is interested in horseback-riding. I decided to ask if I could. She wasn't using it for anything (the anarchists had unsuccessfully tried to turn it into a plow horse), and it would be very useful in my solitary wanderings. She received me standing up in the hall where we ~~usually have~~ ^{give} our talks.

Seen thus, without the mysterious atmosphere of that evening, she's a woman who looks to be about thirty-five, solemn, distant, and courteous. She has a velvety contralto voice that sometimes takes on an almost imperceptible tremolo. I told her how surprised I was that she spoke such good Catalan.

"You shouldn't be. I lived in Barcelona for so many years! I was fifteen when I first went there. I always spoke it with him and his mother. She was from Barcelona."

It seemed so unlikely that she would have gotten along with the mother that I prudently changed the subject.

"I know there's a monastery near here, about ten miles downstream."

"The Olivet Monastery; they were Mercedarians. The Virgin of Olivet was greatly venerated around here. Many of us are named after her."

"So your name is Maria de Olivet?"

"Maria de Olivet is the full name, as it's written on birth certificates. We usually say 'Olivela.'"

She seemed distant, barely there. Sometimes she felt as unreal as on that evening when I saw her outlined against the sunset. She's got

"something," that much is clear at a glance. Marked by tragedy, I'd say.

X Anyway, how could she not be marked by tragedy after everything she's ~~lived~~ ^{been} through? I've gathered that she's from a poor family. Being

someone's mistress cuts her off from her family and social class, placing her both above and below them. Those anarchist swine killed the lord in front of her and the children. But that's not it; the tragedy comes from inside, not from her life. I tried to imagine what her loneliness felt like. She's still got her children, of course, but how much company can children be?

"My first outing with Bellota will be to the monastery."

"Don't go there," and she looked me straight in the eye for the first time. "The anarchists looted it after killing the monks. The Virgin's disappeared. It's terrifying. They opened the tombs . . ." Her voice took on that tremolo, like the ^{lowest} ~~deepest~~ note on a cello.

Through the window I saw a farmhand--the only one she's got left--saddling ~~up~~ Bellota outside the castle gate. She's a fine animal, bay; small head, broad haunches. She seemed pleased to get out of her stable for a while.

"The tombs?"

"The anarchists . . . they pulled the monks out of their niches. You know they even shot the hired hands? A few poor devils, the poorest in town. The monks hired them mainly out of charity. They wore heavy, wooden-soled sandals; that's how poor they were. The anarchists shot them as fascists, because they worked for the monks . . ."

I recalled my conversation with Soleràs. I hadn't paid much attention at the time. It had seemed like a stream of absurdities and nonsequiturs cooked up in his usual corrosive sauce. "These fools"--he was referring to Picó, the major, our whole brigade--"These fools can't appreciate our country's few original ideas. As soon as they march into some village, they reestablish order. Tedious! I have to slip away from time to time to places our troops haven't reached, where anarchism still reigns. There I can

breathe! There's a monastery . . ." And he kissed the tips of his fingers, as though savoring some boccato di cardinale. "I've spent long hours there, lost in contemplation, and believe me there's plenty to contemplate.

Especially one mummy, on the left, with a crafty look on his face . . .

Why should they forbid us to dig up the dead if we feel like it? In the name of what? It's very likely that the diggers were a bunch of ~~idiots~~ ^{moron}, that's another story, but maybe that's the whole idea: to become a perfect idiot! Not everyone who wants to can bring it off! Intelligence is old-fashioned, strictly eighteenth-century! The future belongs to the idiots!"

"I can see," I said sarcastically, "that you're well prepared."

"Why not? And besides, what's the difference between Mercedarian friars and Egyptian pharaohs? Why should the fellow who dug up Tutankhamen deserve more respect? Anyone who digs up the dead, whoever he may be, is looking for the same thing: to see the expression on their faces once they've been there for a while--a few dozen years or a few thousand. Our era, which is both idiotic and perverse, has tried to rend the veils that covered death and birth, the obscene and the macabre. If you don't understand that, you understand nothing about our times."

I asked, "Do you think our times are so important that we have to worry about understanding them?"

"Do you know Juli Soleràs?"

A banal question, just to say something, as if I'd said it was a nice day out. How could she have met him? But to judge by the expression on her face, this woman was full of surprises.

"Yes . . ." she said after hesitating a moment. "Why do you ask? Did he say something about me?"

"No. I was just making conversation. He told me about a monastery and some mummies, without going into details, and that's why I thought of

him. He's a funny character. He has an aunt--you know?--who sees visions.

I imagine you've heard of Saint Philomena. But I'm sure that wouldn't interest you. Did he really come around when the anarchists were here?"

"I got the impression that he and the anarchists were great friends. Would you mind doing me a favor? Don't mention him again."

Poor Soleràs. He seems to have a gift for inspiring antipathy. They can't forgive his disrespectful way of talking and his nasty wisecracks. The only people who'll put up with him are Trini and myself. We've known him for so many years! Ever since we were in high school. Later, when Trini and I had started living together, he came to tea almost every afternoon; even when we were doing our stint in the army. Trini and I had had the brilliant idea of *moving in* ~~living~~ together before I had to report for duty. We served at the same time and both of us were second lieutenants. He could have stayed out, since they'd declared him unfit on account of his nearsightedness. Instead, he requested another physical. When you think there are so many people who'd do anything to be declared unfit for military service, and he, just the opposite, moved heaven and earth to get in. Later, when we were both in uniform--we had the good luck to be assigned to a garrison in Barcelona--what he liked best was climbing over the wall and going AWOL, especially when he was on guard duty. He always sat in the same easy chair at our house. For us he was like a big talking bird, strange but familiar, whose wisecracks you forgive because you enjoy his company.

What was he doing around here, where the anarchists might have shot him? Boning up on how to be a idiot? *Nineteen seventeen* ~~1917~~ marked the beginning of a new era, the Era of Idiocy. Blessed are the idiots, for they shall inherit the earth . . ." That was one of his favorite predictions, for, needless to say, one of his weaknesses is that he loves to prophesy.

The river crosses the village limits from southwest to northeast. It's gradually cut a deep, narrow ravine with almost vertical walls. Since that day I've been exploring it with Bellota. After watering the fields, it feeds the ponds of some old flourmills, one of which is still in operation. This mill was as far as I'd ever gotten in my strolls. It's halfway to the monastery. The miller lives there--he's about fifty years old--with his wife, who's toothless and as dark as the flour they mill. They have five or six children. They mill ten bushels of flour a day, but not every day. Sometimes the pond takes a whole day to fill up, and meanwhile they have to wait. I like to watch them work, because I'd never seen such an old-fashioned mill. They open the sluice and start the waterwheel spinning; the millstone slowly begins to turn; the hopper (which they call a lorenza) is a big, rough-hewn wooden funnel. The grain slowly streams out of it and the millstone turns it into coarse flour. With this flour, the women here bake a delicious brown bread. The village has three communal ovens, and on baking days you can smell them a mile away: a smell of burning pine ~~branches~~ and fresh bread that makes your mouth water.

The miller takes advantage of his days of enforced idleness to go hunting with a ferret. The only game that abounds around here is hares, but they've disgusted him ever since he saw one eating carrion. As far as otters are concerned, he'd like to hunt them for their pelts, but the ferret's afraid to attack them, though it'll even attack foxes. It sneaks into their dens while they're sleeping, jumps on their backs and opens their jugular veins with one bite. It's a male, very agile, with teeth sharp as razors. He has to keep it in its cage and handle it very carefully, for the slightest false move could cost him half a finger. He also told me about the monastery and about a huge forest of pines and savins that starts to the left of the river shortly before you get there and extends

for many miles to the north, in which direction there's no other village for a long, long way. Some monks escaped into this forest, but not more than two or three. The river, after crossing the lands attached to the monastery, flows into a lake--or more precisely, a big swamp--called the Cambronera, where, in winter, they hunt ducks and other migratory birds.

X I used the mill pond as a swimming pool, to the astonishment of the miller, his wife, and their kids. They'd never realized that a person could dive like a duck. They raise ducks themselves, small ducks with white feathers and orange beaks and feet who kick up a huge ruckus whenever I dive in. After swimming for half an hour or so, I stretch out on the grass and dry off in the sun. Sometimes I watch the vultures ^{soaring} ~~gliding~~ overhead. They must come from far away, from those bald mountains to the south--Sierras de Alcubierre--or perhaps from some others even farther south, barely visible through my field glasses, veiled in bluish mist. With Cruells's telescope, you can see that they're covered with thick woods. As far as the vultures are concerned, more than once I've seen a pair ^{it} ~~at an~~ incredible height ^{to} ~~to~~ I was able to calculate it with my glasses and estimating their wing spans: seven feet on the female, who's bigger than the male. I'd seen her cross the entire sky, from one horizon to the other, without the slightest flutter of her wings. The only possible explanation is that they're borne along by ^{a stream of air} ~~an air current~~ imperceptible here on the ground. At other times they inscribe concentric circles around the sun, like giant moths attracted by that motionless ball of fire. Of course, they're not really circling the sun. Why should they care about the sun? They're circling ^a ~~the~~ buitrera; there's one in each village.

X The paths by the riverside are excellent for horseback riding. Bellota gallops along happily on the soft, sandy soil. Some stretches are actually the riverbed. The mare's legs raise clouds of iridescent dust. When dusk

X falls and a breeze blows up, amid the poplars' leaves, the jasmine, and wild honeysuckle you can hear all kinds of birds chirping: blackbirds, goldfinches, orioles, and God knows what else. Further away, in the woods, a cuckoo chimes the hours.

The day of my first ride, I reached the monastery soaking wet. Bellota's a real charmer. Her big, liquid eyes are full of tenderness and mystery; her glossy, black mane and tail almost reach the ground, since no one bothers to crop her. But while she's docile by nature, she's skittish and capricious. Everything had gone smoothly as long as we were galloping down that sandy path. After being cooped up for so many months, she loves to stretch her legs. When the path turned into the riverbed, she suddenly knelt down and rolled around in the cool water, leaving me in a state you can easily imagine.

The miller and his family hardly noticed me. They couldn't stop gaping at the horse.

"Jesus! Isn't that Bellota?" the wife asked, crossing herself.

"You recognize her?"

"Like she was my own daughter! She was the young master's mare, may he rest in peace. Everyone in Olivet knows her."

And that started them talking about her. They'd never mentioned her till then. From the man, we quickly turned to his mistress. At first, the miller's wife didn't dare to tell me what was in her mind, but I could see from her insinuations and hesitations that she knew all about her and had strong opinions on the subject. My curiosity was piqued, and I tried to draw her out.

"That slut," she muttered through her toothless gums. "She should have stayed in Barcelona, where there's plenty of her kind, instead of coming home. We don't need filth like her in Olivet."

"What was she doing in Barcelona?"

"She was a maid. She worked for the old lady when she was still alive. She was very young when she went away with them, not more than fifteen."

A maid; that's why she got along with the old lady. Such a simple explanation hadn't occurred to me.

"Before she went to Barcelona, was she like the other girls here?"

"Not at all! Always moping around by herself. If you ask me, she was different from the rest of us. You can see who our fathers are. If she turned out to be such a lady, there must have been some kind of graft. God knows who it was! If you graft a peach tree branch onto an apricot tree, you get peaches!"

"Don't talk that way, woman," said the miller, who apparently doesn't share his wife's hatred of Olivela. "Only God knows the truth. When Olivela left she was just a snot-nosed little girl. Fifteen years old? That young master had his way with her--may he rest in peace now that he's dead--and stole her honor."

"Honor? Poor thing!" she exclaimed, making fun of his pitying tone. "She doesn't know what honor is! The rest of us got married to save our honor! ~~not to find a husband~~. But that whore came home to roost in the castle. The slut wanted to lord it over us, without sowing or reaping or hauling dung or anything else. She lives like a real lady, lieutenant, like a real grand lady: in the morning she feeds her pig and the chickens, in the afternoon she goes for a stroll, and at bedtime she bathes with hot water and perfumed soap like the fat sow she is . . ."

"Shh! Don't talk that way," her husband interrupted. "The lieutenant here likes to bathe too. You're going to make him mad with that foul mouth of yours."

X This conversation interested me more and more, and not for its local color (which always goes along with dirt-slinging), so I kept trying to squeeze information out of them.

"When did she come back from Barcelona?"

"When the old lady died, may she rest in peace," he explained, trying to jump in ahead of his wife. "No one around here knew then what had happened."

"Ten years ago," she added, "she came home with a belly like this, which was the first time we realized she'd sinned. She gave birth in the castle, and a few years later she had another kid."

"And the master lived with her?"

"No sir; he lived in his house in Barcelona, but he came back all the time."

"He was a lawyer," the miller explained, "and had cases in Barcelona."

"And love affairs in Olivel," she added.

"Why didn't he marry her?"

"God Almighty!" The woman burst out laughing. "Since when do lords and lawyers marry filthy peasant sluts?"

This shovelful of dirt was too much for me, and I ended the conversation with the excuse that I wanted to reach the monastery.

The monastery's like one of those big structures--half farmhouses, half manors--that you see in Catalonia, and in fact the monks were farmers. It's a big, square building on the northern edge of a little valley with vineyards and olive groves, ringed by low, barren hills. One of them is called Calvary. It's distinguished by the double row of cypresses that winds up toward its summit. The valley's calm, as though it had withdrawn into itself. It takes Bellota a half-hour to forty-five minutes to reach it at a gallop. Since then I've made the trip often.

X Now I'll tell you what I saw. The big ~~entrance~~ gate opens onto a kind of esplanade that leads you to the church, tall and spacious. A thousand people could fit inside it standing up. The first day, I crossed its threshold with a certain apprehension. There was something oppressive about that silence. The morning was hot and dry. I'd hitched the mare to an elm tree on the esplanade. I went in. My first sensation was a pleasant coolness. I was still dazzled by the Aragonese July sun. In that cool penumbra, as in a wine cellar, I couldn't make out a thing. Slowly my retina adapted ~~I~~ began to see the smoke-blackened remains of baroque altars, piles of books strewn around, a few candlesticks that had been broken and tossed onto the floor, artificial flowers, a censer in one corner, a lectern in another. At the opposite end, at the foot of the main altar, stood some objects you would have taken for monks if they weren't so motionless. They were mummies, removed from the niches that now stand open and gaping in the wall behind the altar. They'd been arranged in a bizarre scene. Two stood before the altar like a couple getting married. One was adorned with a white veil and a crown of artificial flowers. To keep them from falling they'd leaned them against each other. A third mummy leaned against the altar, facing them like a priest about to perform the ceremony.

The others--of which there were four, all leaning against the wall--were the wedding guests. One had fallen over and was lying on the ground. Another had a sinister expression that chilled my blood.

X They must have been monks who died a long ~~time~~ ago. Shreds of their habits still clung to their skin. They were perfectly ~~dried~~ ^{dry} but--as though they were made of parchment--which must be caused by the ~~dry~~ ^{arid} ~~climate~~ ^{climate} ~~air around~~ here and the fact that the niches are inside a thick stone wall high off the ground. How weird they looked, so still and dry! I'd gotten

over my fear. How could I feel scared with that big door wide open behind me and the brilliant midday sun in all its glory outside?

X It wasn't fear; it was a sort of eerie feeling. Those objects were simply incomprehensible. A mummy is beyond us. How can we imagine that someday we'll be objects? Objects we can cart around from one place to another, stiff and empty. Empty of what? Of their souls, you'll say, but what is a soul?

X Still, it must be something if its flight provokes such a remarkable change. What do I have in common with a mummy? Externally, everything; and nonetheless, nothing.

And whose idea was it to arrange them in a wedding scene? The obscene and the macabre: they stuck a candle (perhaps an Easter candle) between the legs of the mummy who plays the groom . . . I'd like to track down one of the guys who opened the niches and make him talk. Maybe I wouldn't find out much; they themselves probably aren't conscious of the symbolism of what they did. And then again, what do we know about our instincts? Preservation of the species: who ever gave a damn about that? Who ever thinks of it at the moment when we're striving to achieve it? Bah, no one gives it a moment's thought, yet it's what moves us. Sex and death, the obscene and the macabre, two dizzying abysses. And it's as if the macabre had lain in wait to ambush me in this village: the buitrera on the one hand and the monastery on the other. As I gazed at those dried-out mummies, I felt the vague thirst in my throat that I'd noticed at the buitrera.

To live, to gulp down great draughts of life before I end up as motionless as those mummies in the church.

Olivet, August 7

X
voyages
X
travels
wing
g that give
A stone staircase, its steps polished by years of use, leads up from the church to the monks' cells. The big hall at the top of the stairs is strewn with enormous antiphonaries with parchment pages and covers adorned with studs. There are various abandoned harmoniums (the church had no organ) and piles and piles of books--mostly from the eighteenth century. I found a complete edition, in the original English, of Cook's ~~travels~~ with etchings by the artist who accompanied the expedition. They're hand-painted ^{using} in watercolors, ^{g that give} giving a vivid and exact sense of each species. The pomegranate's flowers are a glorious bright red--and I thought of Olivella. Why? What's so glorious about her? The glory of sin and tragedy? My God, what a melodrama! "The uncertain glory of an April day"? It's odd: she started when I told her I planned to visit the monastery. "Don't go there . . . The Virgin's disappeared . . . It's terrifying." She must have been terrifyingly beautiful herself, years ago. Beauty fills us with terror when it goes beyond certain limits. She must have gone well beyond them--and how!--because she still does. She's still terrifying. The world's full of pretty women, but how few are truly beautiful! Perhaps I'll never meet another who makes me think of Michelangelo's "The Night." With her I have the unpleasant sensation short men must have with tall women; and nonetheless, I'm taller than her. I compared us without her noticing. I'm almost a foot taller.

Piaceme il sonno e più l'esser di sasso.

Why do I think so much about this woman? Because I'm bored stiff in this hole. How old can she be? Ten years older than me? She gives the impression of having aged before her time, and how could it be otherwise, with everything she's been through? That's not so extraordinary. What's extraordinary is that the beginnings of age, with their touch of melancholy, make her look so good.

X In another cell there's a little cupboard built into the wall so that it can be opened from either side. I heard a kind of hissing like the sound of wheat passing through a sieve--sometimes far away and sometimes right beside me, almost in my ear. It occurred to me to open the door on that cupboard, a little door less than a foot square, made of worm-eaten wood, and the mystery was solved! The cupboard was designed as a beehive. The bees are as busy as ever, indifferent to our ups and downs. The cupboard's full of honey! Their buzzing, now that I know what it is, keeps me company during my long, silent hours in the monastery.

In the cell next door I got another surprise. A door in the outer wall leads to a winding staircase that I climbed to a small attic with a dovecote.

The doves are still there too, as though nothing had ever happened. Various females are roosting. They've no longer tame. When they heard my steps, the males flew away. The females stared at me in terror but didn't forsake their nests.

Next I explored the basement. There's a big wine cellar. The monastery's main product was wine. The miller told me the anarchists began their looting in the cellar: an orgy of claret made by the monks. But it was an orderly debauchery. The barrels haven't been damaged and are almost full. They had more respect for them than for the mummies. One barrel is enormous, a real old-fashioned hogshead. It's made of oak and bears a coat-of-arms and a date: 1585.

I'd like to reconstruct that hot night at the end of last July. An orgy of wine, of blood and mummies inflamed by the midsummer heat. Were there women present? The miller insists there weren't. So the idea for that candle . . . it seemed feminine to me; something a whore would think of.

X The miller is categorical. The murderers were seven outsiders who made up the committee. They dragged half a dozen simpletons from the village along to help them. It was these locals who actually ~~dragged~~ ^{pulled} the mummies from their niches, forced by the others. "Six poor devils. Everyone in town knows who they are." "They still live here?" "Yes, but don't get them in trouble. All they did was dig up some corpses."

The miller saw them going and coming back. His mill is on the way from Olivet to the monastery. There were no women. Not only that--and this really intrigues me--he says all they did was lean the mummies against the wall beneath their niches. He was very surprised when I told him about that wedding scene.

"Well, they weren't like that before, lieutenant. I swear to God!"

"Are you sure?"

"The last time I was there, some four months ago, they weren't like you say, lieutenant, but like I'm telling you, leaning against the wall."

"What about the candle?" He stared at me with eyes as big as saucers. He didn't understand what I was asking. Finally he got the point and burst out laughing.

X "God Almighty! What a swine whoever did that must have been! But it wasn't them; I can swear to that, lieutenant. I'll tell you who they are, but don't get them in trouble. One's Pachorro, the hunchback who lives near the fountain; another's Restituto, who's a little ~~touched~~ ^{craquelé} in the head. . ."

I'll have to visit all six to try and unravel this business.

On one of my first visits to the monastery (I went there every day; I couldn't stay away), I stopped at the main door, listening to a sound coming from the cells. Notes in joyous disorder, played on flutes, violins, and basses, mixed with childish voices, laughter, and a patter of footsteps

so light they sounded like fluttering wings. Who could it be? I slowly mounted the steps. If I'd found a flock of cavorting cherubim I wouldn't have been surprised. It was a gang of goatherds between seven and ten years old, who'd left their flocks in the monastery stable and gone up to play the harmoniums. My appearance caused utter panic. They fled with such grace, all wearing big straw hats and velvet pants that came down below their knees, that I stood there spellbound for a long time.

I usually brought along something to eat so I wouldn't have to return to Olivet for lunch. That way I had plenty of time to sort through the books calmly and methodically. Most of them are on theology, and many are in Latin, but some are fascinating. I found a first edition of the

X
2X ^{go} ~~eat~~ ^{eat}
Criticón that helped me stay awake on guard duty. When I got hungry, I'd
went down and had lunch in the cellar. It's deep and dark. You have to
feel your way along the big stone stairs, worn away by centuries of use.

X
As you try to find each step, cool wine fumes waft up to ^{meet} ~~meet~~ you. Once
I was down there, surrounded by barrels, I'd light a little oil lamp and sit
down to eat. I felt I couldn't do it upstairs, with all those mummies

around. The coolness of the cellar and those wine fumes, on the other
hand, gave me an appetite. The lamp's flickering flame cast barrel-shaped
shadows on the walls made of coarse stones roughly fitted together and
covered with thick cobwebs, some of which might have been centuries old.

X
The claret ^{is} ~~is~~ cold, very dry and aromatic ^{is} ~~is~~ has a touch of flint and sulfur
(the latter must come from the sulfurized switches they use to fumigate
the barrels before filling them with new wine, as all good wine growers
do). When I'd finished, I'd blow out the oil lamp and retrace my steps. I
had to go through the church again to reach the cells, where the biggest
piles of old books were.

One afternoon I'd gotten more deeply engrossed than usual in

examining those old books. I'd just discovered an edition of Petrarch's sonnets printed by Elzevir and a Summa Theologica with marvelous vignettes. I was looking through them when a tremendous thunderclap suddenly roused me. I looked out the window. The sky was darkening, in sudden changes of color, as though a stage hand were switching off lights focused on a set depicting clouds. Another thunderclap--this one jagged and cavernous--boomed out right above the monastery, making me feel the lightning bolt must have struck its empty steeple.

X As I watched, the landscape took on a livid, corpse-like color. The thunder and lightning came thick and fast. The bolts seemed to light up the inside of the building more than what was outdoors. That must have been because the objects inside were closer, but at the time it made me profoundly uneasy. It was like a night when heat lightning--the most enervating kind of storm--makes the earth brighter than the sky, whose asphixiating black contrasts with the landscape's ^{faint} feeble luminescence. The anguish thus provoked must be due to our realization that the universe around us is darkness: ~~the~~ outer darkness.

X It began to pour, and the rain lifted that sense of oppression. A dry storm is nerve-wracking. Sheets of rain beat against the monastery's tile roof, making it resound like an empty crate.

I had to ride back to the village, but in order to get out I had to walk through the church. I did walk through it, keeping my eyes fixed on the open door's bright rectangle. I was in the middle of the nave when the two panels began to slowly turn on their hinges and then shut with a groan that echoed through the vaults. The dusky darkness had turned black--black as a moonless night--and I was trapped. All alone with the mummies.

You know what I did then? I crossed myself and said a paternoster.

There's nothing like dread to make us kneel down and pray. A gust of wind had blown the door shut. I easily opened it. Outside, it was raining cats and dogs. I ran toward the elm. Bellota was gone. A piece of bridle dangling from the tree told the story: the mare, terrified by the thunder, had snapped her reins and run away.

X In one minute, I'd gotten as soaked as if I'd fallen into a ^{lake} ~~pond~~. What should I do? Go back inside and spend the night in one of the cells? I couldn't; I was too scared. It was madness to think I could reach the village without the mare, but I could try to reach the mill.

X I was far from the monastery when I realized that the Parral was no longer a stream but a huge river that ^{swelled} ~~was swelling~~ by the minute. I couldn't follow its course down in that ravine. I'd have to climb out and spend the night up above. Once I was on the bank I saw a pale light in the distance. It was like something out of a fairy tale! I made my way through the brush and through blinding sheets of water, I reached that mysterious glow, and I found the miller, his wife, and their half-dozen children.

With an axe, they'd improvised a little shelter made of savin trunks covered with rosemary and mastic branches. His wife was sobbing, while the children huddled around her. The older ones stared at her with dark, serious eyes; the younger ones were sleeping. The miller moved over to make room for me.

"Don Luisico, we're ruined!"

"Our mill!" she wailed. "My chickens who were such good layers; and that sow we were fattening!"

X He ^{peered} ~~looked~~ down into the ravine, as though searching for the remains of his mill in the darkness.

"There's another mill around here, upstream from the village, that

hasn't been used for years. If they'd rent it to us, but on credit till we can begin milling . . ."

"Whose is it?"

"It belonged to the dead master, may he rest in peace. If you, since you're such good friends with the mistress . . . I mean, with Olivela . . ."

"Lieutenant, don't get the wrong idea," she said, drying her eyes. "I don't mean her any harm. What I said about her wasn't said out of spite."

It's better she should think so.

As soon as day broke, we set out on our sad retreat. In Olivela, we found the streets full of men and women. The women screamed and wept; the men were silent.

The downpour had washed away everything in their irrigated fields. The corn and hemp crops were completely lost. The poor villagers' sole remaining hope is saffron, which they grow on dry land well away from the riverbed and which in good years is their main source of cash.

X Olegaria, the old lady whose house I'm billeted in, had been worrying about me. I haven't mentioned this filthy old dame, who cooks ~~me~~² up some revolting meals. With the best intentions in the world, since they're the same ones she'd fix for her grandson. I'll tell you about her grandson another day.

There was a letter from Trini: "Your son's appetite for bedtime stories grows more insatiable by the day. He always asks for more; he always wants another one. 'Daddy told me more,' he complains, and even adds, 'and they were nicer.' Now I've started telling him about wicked stepmothers. His eyes get big as he listens, but he has trouble understanding where the father fits in. 'But what was the little boy's daddy doing all that time?' To reassure him, I tell him she beat his father too . . ."

Olegaria knows as much about my son's doings as I do. She's illiterate--like all the women in this village--but she can recognize Trini's handwriting on the envelope.

She thinks, of course, that we're husband and wife. There was no reason to explain it to her; it'd be too complicated. She waits for me to finish reading before asking how Ramonet is and talks about him as though she'd known him all his life.

X She's very old and lives with her only daughter, who's a widow and looks over fifty. The meals they cook for me deserve special mention; they're horrible. One Sunday, as a special treat, they decided to cook ~~me~~² a whole chicken. The art of roasting a chicken is still unknown around here. They submerge the chicken in a pot of oil and simmer it. On my first bite, that aftertaste of oil was so surprising that I made a face.

"Is there something wrong with the chicken? Isn't it oily enough?"

She told me the villagers thought I was dead since they saw the mare come back alone with its bridle snapped.

"So where's Bellota?"

"Why, in the castle! Where else would she be? She doesn't need a guide to get back to her stable; it's her home! Animals are people too!"

Without realizing it, she'd just defined herself: she's such an animal and such a person, old Olegaria!

Olivel de la Virgen, Sunday, August 8

The Parral has shrunk back to its former size, cheerful and happy as if nothing out of the ordinary had occurred. The saffron harvest looks like it'll be the biggest in years, and the peasants are expecting to make up for their lost hemp and corn crops.

There's been a change in our battalion: we now have an artillery

company. I was crossing the main street yesterday when I saw a heavy-set officer over forty years old, wearing hunting boots and gripping an enormous S-shaped pipe between his teeth. His Oriental-looking eyes, sharp and crafty, reminded me of someone but I couldn't think who it was.

"I'm Picó. Don't you remember me? We went swimming together..."

"And what brings you to Olivela?"

X ^{They've}
"They assigned us to your battalion," he said, puffing on his pipe and squinting. "Have you heard anything from Soleràs?"

"I haven't seen him in quite a while."

X
"A very well-read young man, but the filthiest in the brigade. During one operation we had to sleep outdoors in January. To keep warm we huddled together in groups of three or four with all our blankets piled on top of us. The officers had a separate pile, of course; one has to avoid excessive familiarity with the troops. Would you believe I couldn't stand it? He stank worse than a billygoat! 'Listen, kid. I'm sorry, but I'd rather you didn't sleep with us.' He had to sleep by himself, and like I said this was out in the open, and it was fifteen or twenty degrees. You know what he did? He piled all the dung from the company's mules on top of himself. Over a foot of snow fell. 'Poor Soleràs,' we ~~all~~ ^I said, 'all alone with a single blanket. He must have frozen his ass off.' The next day he assured us he'd been sweating all night."

"I'm sure it was true. Covered with dung and a foot of snow on top of that! Better than four eiderdowns! That's wasn't a bad idea."

"What can I tell you? I'd rather get frostbite! Culture's all right, but without hygiene..."

Today I called on Olivela to apologize for what had happened with the mare. I also mentioned the miller and his family.

"I don't mind renting them the mill at Albernes. I'm obliged to help

them."

X I'm writing in my bedroom--that is, Olegaria's grandson's bedroom. I've grown fond of this bedroom; the grandson I still don't know. It's a square room, with whitewashed walls and eight reddish, warped beams on the ceiling--they're savin--that still give off a noticeable smell of resin. There's a little window facing west, and through it I can see the village's main square. The iron bedstead's painted bright red. The bed, a wicker-bottomed chair, and a night table are the only pieces of furniture. As far as hygiene is concerned (as Picó would say), there's a washbasin--that is, a bowl on an iron tripod. Olegaria makes sure I always have a clean towel and a bar of almond-scented soap that perfumes the whole room. You can see I've come up in the world since I left Castel de Olivo! I'm writing by the light from a candle-stub, listening to the crickets through my open window. The air is hot; I'm starting to feel sleepy. Now I can hear Gallart and Ponsetti, who are crossing the main square. They must be on their way to Melitona's tavern. While they stay up late, I'll be snug in bed--the best place to be at night. The mattress sags in the middle. At first it bothered me so much that I had trouble sleeping. Now I've gotten so used to it that it would bother me if it weren't like that. I've gotten to know it; it keeps me company. The same as it must have done with Olegaria's grandson, who's probably missing it now . . .

I'm half asleep, remembering my conversation with Olivela, as if it had been a dream.

"Have you known the miller and his wife long?"

"All my life. We're from the same village."

"You mean Olivela?"

"No, not Olivela. Castel de Olivo."

"Weren't you born in Olivela?"

"Santiago and I are first cousins. A few years ago, when her husband was looking for a mill, he asked Enrique if he could rent ours. But Enrique knew she was saying nasty things about me in the village, so he said no. I don't hold grudges, and besides, I have to help a cousin."

It's strange that the miller's wife never told me they were related. Is she ashamed? Or does she have her doubts? "If she turned out to be such a lady, there must have been some kind of graft." Just a hypothesis, of course. Once we start hypothesizing, we can go on forever . . .

"The millpond in Albernes is twice as big as the other one. We used it for irrigation. If they want to, they can lease the fields along with the mill, so they'll have two ways to make money."

Basically, I wasn't paying much attention to what she was saying. It was as though she were talking about something very remote: Santiago, the mill in Albernes. It wasn't the words but her voice I was listening to. Some nights I wake ~~up~~ ^I with a start, and as I fall back asleep I can hear that voice, rich and warm as a perfume, serious and solemn as a promise . . .

Olivel, August 10

Yesterday I spent the day in Castel de Olivo. They'd summoned me to brigade headquarters to draw up an indictment. If you knew how much I hate drawing up indictments! I closed the case.

It was past midnight by the time I got back to Olivet. I had to go on foot because Bellota's still recovering from that downpour and stays in her stable under a big burlap cloth. The road to Castel de Olivo runs along the edge of a broad, uncultivated valley with a salt marsh at one end. Hundreds, maybe thousands of toads dwell there: big, medium-sized, and small. Each one sounded his note: clear, distinct, and precise, a magic

tinkling of crystal bells. The moonless night made the stars shine more brightly, each as clear, distinct, and precise as those notes. I'd been walking for an hour and half, and was about halfway there. I sat down, and for a long time the spell of the desert, the toads, and the night kept me rooted to the spot. Sagittarius brandished his starry bow in the very heart of the Milky Way, where it's as dense as a cloud of tiny diamonds. From time to time a shiver ran through me--I don't know if it was from the night breeze or from my fear--and I thought of her and her voice and thought to myself, "She's the most womanly woman I've ever known."

X The world is so beautiful, but we turn our backs on it ^{and} ~~to~~ invent our squalid little hells . . . Poor Soleràs! "The hell I've invented for my private use is remarkably cramped," he told me, "and there's no room for anyone else." Why is he avoiding me when I'm the only ^{one} ~~person~~ in this brigade who cares about him?

I'd run into him in Castel de Olivo.

I decided to call on the woman whose house I'd been billeted in.

"Imagine seeing you here! That friend of yours is staying in the attic where you used to sleep!"

"Soleràs?"

It must have been around two in the afternoon, and he was napping. I crept up the stairs, planning to surprise him. The attic gave off that rabbit-stench I knew so well, and the door was shut. He stirred in his bed. I couldn't see him; my eyes hadn't gotten used to the dark, but I heard his ringing, sarcastic voice.

"What are you doing here?"

I briefly explained that they'd summoned me to draw up an indictment. "They could have asked you instead," I added, "since you're a lawyer too."

"If I'd known you were coming, I'd have headed for Montforte."

"Thanks a lot. We haven't seen each other in almost two months."

"If you understood things more clearly, you wouldn't want to see me."

"If I understood what more clearly?"

"That you and I should hate each other, Lluís."

"Why should I hate you? Because of your supposed degeneracy? I've known you too long for that. You like to put on airs, act like a cynic. I've heard it all a thousand times before, and believe me, I couldn't care less. Your vices are all made up. You're a hypocrite of vice, which is even more common than those of virtue. All that stuff about morphine was just so much hot air. You never took anything stronger than lime-flower tea."

"I'm in no mood to be insulted," he growled.

"I even suspect sometimes that your aunt's never seen a vision."

"You doubt the existence of Saint Philomena?"

"One thing is whether she exists . . ."

"To exist or not exist: that is the question. People don't have the aunts they choose, even though, when you come right down to it, everyone has the aunt he deserves. And what about the Innocents?"

"What Innocents?"

"Are you also casting doubt on the existence of the Holy Innocents?" His bass voice grew more emphatic. "Are you going to deny the existence of those paper tails they pin on people's asses? Many wear them and never even realize it: big shots, great men, sublime geniuses!" and he laughed unpleasantly. "They don't notice and they'll never notice! They forget they have backsides, so sublime have they become! They don't even believe in paper tails. They're skeptics, you know, and skeptics aren't allowed to believe in anything. But they believe in themselves, in their own importance. It's Satan, with his sense of humor, who pinned those tails on

their asses. A little portable hell stuck where they can't see it. And I'm not just talking about somber skeptics, no. There are rose-colored skeptics too, even more remarkable. They're so angelic that they don't believe in hell. Innocent lambs! This is particularly true of certain ladies: ladies from the very best families, of course, gorgeous ladies, ladies who attend lectures at the Saint Vincent de Paul Society. They don't believe in it, but it's pinned to them just the same! A little portable hell, a tail! And when good-looking ladies are involved, I pay close attention. They fuss a lot over their faces, when what's most interesting isn't their faces but quite the opposite."

"Why don't you cut the crap?"

He looked at me mockingly.

"I assume you've heard of Easter candles?"

"Easter candles?"

X He pointed to the wall: that wall ^{covered with} ~~full of~~ idiotic graffiti. I'd opened the door to let in some light and air.

"Let's assume you're right: that my vices are purely imaginary," he said as I examined the wall. There were new drawings, drawings I was sure hadn't been there before. "Add another adjective: solitary. What a pair of adjectives! A good pair of adjectives is worth a lot! Let's assume I snuck off to drink lime-flower tea . . ."

There were definitely some new drawings. One caught my eye in particular. It depicted a kind of procession, men or women, it was hard to tell which because the anonymous artist had sketched them so roughly. What caught my eye was that each figure bore a big candle, lit and dripping hot wax, and a tail hung from each backside.

X "I don't know if you've noticed that Easter candles are left burning from Easter Saturday to ^{Holy Thursday} ~~Ascension Day~~, and then that's it till next year.

We all live in the hope that each year, on Easter Saturday, they'll light them again--that is, at the beginning of spring. But one year they won't light them. One year spring won't come. Haven't you ever felt that April, with its uncertain glory, is slipping through our fingers? And uncertain or not, it's the only glory we'll know. But getting back to those Easter candles . . ."

"Shut up about Easter candles! I don't believe in God, but I respect religion."

X "I'm just the opposite. I'm a believer. If I weren't, what pleasure could I get from blasphemy? If only I could stop believing! How I envy you--you who don't believe or think you don't believe! You, for example, have the best luck of all! When faith would get in your way, it disappears; when you need it, it comes back! Don't deny it! That's how you operate! An unbeatable mechanism! With me it's the other way around. Faith gets in my way when I least want it, ~~and~~ ^{but} when I call on it, it won't come."

"You think you're impressing me with all this nonsense? It's true that those of us who don't have it wish we did, but the opposite . . . to have it and wish we didn't . . . that's absurd."

"Exactly. Absurdity's got us in its clutches--and above all, there's the magnetic attraction of evil. We've been granted so little time to do all the evil we'd like to do! We'd like to do much more, but we just don't have the time! And besides, it's not as easy as some people think! Not any old evil deed, but the one you'd really like to do, because after all, to do an evil deed that doesn't interest you, that's not going to satisfy . . . That's what's so evil about evil: that what you can do is precisely what doesn't interest you, and meanwhile your life is ticking away. April's slipping through our fingers, believe me, and this damned war is the last straw. It may last a long time, long enough to really get on our nerves. You guys

don't have any imagination: you think it's like being caught in a thunderstorm and then going home to a nice big bowl of hot soup after you change your shirt and socks. You'll see what kind of soup you've gotten into. You're going to puke your guts out! Or maybe you haven't heard of nausea? Doesn't the word ring a bell?"

He said all this without getting up from his cot. He reached out and picked up a canteen sitting on the broken wicker-bottomed chair he used as a night table.

"You want a sip? It's cognac, I swear to God. It's not cane liquor; it's cognac. And better still, it's fascist cognac! Genuine Andalusian cognac! One of the few surviving bottles."

He drank a swig and, after wiping his lips, returned to his train of thought.

X "You know, you still haven't told me how you liked that Easter candle ^{at} in the monastery. And there's something else of note in Olivela besides the mummies. I suppose you've discovered that too."

"What are you talking about?"

X "Olivela, the lady ^{at} in the castle! She's not to be missed! Remarkable in more than one respect, but . . . what's the matter?"

"Nothing's the matter; don't be an idiot."

"Everyone knows that Olivela . . ."

"That Olivela what?"

"That she lends you her mare. She wouldn't lend her to me."

"You spend your time spying on me?"

"You'll understand that in the same brigade, news about your friends travels fast. I know you visit the monastery every day, that you mount her--don't be offended, I mean the mare. I even know you're busy rescuing old books and other portable items of value. I'm telling you all this so you

won't worry; in fact, it's very highly regarded. Your major informed the commander, praising your love of culture to the skies. Everyone in this brigade's wild about culture and hygiene; it's not like the Flatfoot Brigade. The entire brigade, therefore, is relying on your love of culture to bring a little order to that 'historic building'--the whole brigade knows it's an 'historic building'--so they can return it in good shape to the Mercedarians when circumstances permit. Circumstances: you get my point?"

"I see, but you could say so without so many nasty insinuations. It's annoying."

X
"We have to put up with so many annoying things . . . Religion, for example. Since we're talking about monks and monasteries, religion fits this conversation like a glove. Why does religion annoy us so much? A false religion wouldn't be annoying; it'd be more fun than anything else. What annoys us is when they rub salt in our wounds--and precisely the wound that's already sorest. Because--don't kid yourself--they see things as they are; that's what's so annoying. We all want the same thing, we're dying for it, but we can't have it. April slips through our fingers. They make and break us without asking our permission. Who? Why? 'Kid, mind your own business.' Fine; since you won't tell us who or why, couldn't you also keep us from knowing how? Godella's a magnificent place, the summer heat ~~makes secret dates~~ ^{gives rise to} the most reprehensible wishes, ~~dates~~ ^{wishes} impregnated with the smell of salt. The sea's right there. My aunt, of course, had forbidden me to go swimming. I had to do it behind her back, not on the regular beach--which could be seen from our house--but in a deserted cove where I could go naked. My aunt wouldn't buy me a bathing suit.

2X

"And it was in that same cove that . . . I was twelve years old. I

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heard their voices before I saw them: two voices, a man's and a woman's, foreigners. Foreigners have always fascinated me. I hid among the reeds and fennel so I could spy on them. He was very blond and very tan. You could see he'd been out in the sun for weeks: tall, broad-shouldered, with a hairy chest, the kind that makes your shirt stand out from your chest-- hair that sparkled like gold against his chocolate-colored ~~skin~~ ^{face}. He roared with laughter, showing his magnificent teeth--white, insolent teeth like savages have. At twelve, you know, I already had tooth trouble. They'd gotten out of a motorboat that they'd beached on the shore. They were foreigners, I couldn't understand a word they were saying, and for that reason, because since I can't understand them, foreigners have always intrigued me, I stayed to spy on them. I could smell the fennel warmed by the August sun as they laughed and chatted. I wanted to see what foreigners do. I thought people who talked so oddly must do odd things too. She seemed quite a lot older than him: one of those ripe, well-preserved Nordic types who look like they're made of some firm, pliable substance like India rubber. Every morning, they visited that cove in their boat, all summer long. From Godella, I could hear the motor putt-putting and would run down to my hiding place. One day as I was on my way I saw a dead donkey abandoned by some gypsies. From that moment on, the donkey interested me more than the foreigners. The first day it didn't stink, and in fact it looked quite respectable; only a certain ironic curl of its lip suggested that it had something nasty in mind. In fact, it was planning--as events would shortly demonstrate--to stink to high heaven. The next day it had swelled up so much that I could hardly recognize it. I thought maybe the village butcher had pumped it full of air. He always pumped up kids before skinning them, because he said it was easier that way. In case you don't know, the butcher's name was Pancràs. He'd stick a

thick reed into the kids from behind and blow into it till they puffed up. Intrigued by my inflated donkey, I pricked its skin with a sharp stick. Once I'd pulled the stick out, the hole whistled and the donkey slowly deflated like a punctured tire. The air grew thick with the stench . . . and I ran away. It was unbearable.

"I ran to my hiding place by the cove. The foreigners were there. He laughed more brazenly than ever through his savage teeth; and I threw up. I threw up like a god who repents of his creations. I know you don't believe me. You've never believed me. You think I'm making all this up. You think, like so many others, that we're only brought into this world to drink lime-flower tea. Well, I'm not making it up. I threw up. I would have liked to tell Nati, 'In that cove, you know . . . there are some foreigners who say strange things you can't understand, and there's a dead donkey . . . What they do is even stranger, and the donkey swells up and then goes back to normal . . .' She refused to come with me. That donkey and those foreigners scared her even more than the railroad tracks. I'm not kidding! This is straight from the heart! I went every day, waiting for that donkey to rot away, but nothing happened. At the end of September, those foreigners stopped coming and the donkey still couldn't make up its mind. Curious, I poked it with a stick. Inside its skin, dry as parchment, swarmed an army of rats. They'd gnawed a hole in its belly and eaten its guts, leaving the skin and its outward appearance intact. It's strange how throughout nature we find this respect for appearances, this habit of sneaking off to deserted coves. You don't believe me; you've never believed me, you refuse to mistrust me. If you think I enjoy inspiring so little mistrust . . . with tooth trouble ever since I was twelve years old . . . They make and break us, inflate and deflate us, and nothing excites children as much as this double mystery: how they make us, how they

break us. But they don't ask our permission. 'Kid, mind your own business.'"

"Are you done?"

"For the moment, yes. I was inspired, Lluís, and had to take advantage of the fact that you were here listening to me. Sometimes I've tried to talk to myself, I mean out loud, but it's depressing. You're fooling yourself about my vices. They're not as made-up as you think, or as solitary. No; solitude isn't my strong point. I need accomplices, you know? Talking to myself depresses me. I need an accomplice who'll listen. It's like love, which we all know is a crime, but the worst thing about it is that we can't do it without an accomplice."

"That's nonsense!"

"It wasn't me; it was Baudelaire who said it! Your beloved Baudelaire! But did you know that some people say the universe inflates and deflates like bellows? Yes, the universe! Why are you looking at me like that? First it expands; then it contracts--during saecula saeculorum. But let's talk about things closer to hand. I don't know if you've heard about certain disappearing cans of condensed milk . . . Farmer brand, to be exact . . ."

"From the commissary? That's the indictment they wanted me to draw up. I closed the case for lack of evidence. Besides, I don't like acting as a judge."

He peered at me with mocking curiosity, with that fixed stare of a nearsighted guy who doesn't wear glasses. Then he burst into that cackling laugh of his.

"What a coincidence! Small world! Because you should know that I'm the one who steals those cans of condensed milk. What a pity you closed the case! I steal them from soldiers at the front and give them to whores in the rear. Ever since I've been assigned to the commissary, I take the

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van from time to time and head for the rear. If you knew the things they're willing to do for a can of milk! A lot of them have kids . . . It's sad to think of a baby dying for lack of milk . . . You see, lactation is always a delicate matter, and if the baby's a bastard, born any old way . . . You might still be able to ~~re~~^Topen the case and try me. A summary trial; after all, we're soldiers in wartime. An execution to break the monotony. The whole brigade would thank you."

Naturally, I didn't believe a word he said. He says stuff like that to impress me, to astonish. I've heard it all a million times before.

"You're as incapable of stealing a can of milk as you are of deflating a dead donkey with a pointed stick and all the other baloney you've been blathering about."

"Have it your own way, Lluís. You're passing up a perfect opportunity to get rid of your . . . to get rid of your best friend. It's funny how you can't seem to get the point. Maybe if you read Roland Cuckolded, you'd see it more clearly. Or the article on bicycles in the Espasa Encyclopedia. What a great book! One of the greatest ever written! At least everyone agrees on that, which is something."

The whole village was asleep by the time I got back to Olivet. All the windows were dark. The streets were almost deserted, but in the square I met Captain Gallart and his inseparable pal, Ponsetti.

I don't know what kind of monkey business they were up to, whether they were after some girl or some wine, or both. You could tell at a glance, or at a sniff, that they were boozier than usual. "No one understands us!" cried the public orator, as though he were on Pelayo Street proclaiming the virtues of fountain pens or umbrellas. "That's right, no one understands us!" Gallart insisted. "We're in desperate need of another guitar." "Those bastards in the Flatfoot Brigade . . ." Ponsetti

X growled. ^{All} ~~The only things~~ ⁹ I could gather was that their guitar had disappeared and they thought someone from the Flatfoot Brigade had swiped it--a brigade posted near us, our rivals. I also seemed to gather, though in a much more nebulous fashion, that some important event had occurred in our battalion.

II

Olegaria was waiting for me. She'd stayed up to spare me having to eat a cold supper. Because the good people around here, whose cuisine is so revolting, are appalled at the very idea of eating cold food. I scolded her. I told her it didn't make any difference whether my supper was cold or even whether I skipped supper once in a while, that it might even be good for my health and that it was certainly bad for hers to wait up for me till all hours of the night.

She looked at me and shook her head, completely unconvinced.

"I'm always thinking of our boy, who's in this war just like you."

Needless to say, it wasn't the first time she'd mentioned her grandson. I've gradually gotten to know a few things about him, and I was used to her unshakeable conviction: "When some soldier's in my house, I think they'll treat our boy the same as I treat him." But I'd always assumed he was on the ~~Republican~~ side.

That night, as I ate the supper she'd ^{re}heated and she watched me, I asked her questions about her grandson, including what unit he was in. The poor woman couldn't tell me. She got all mixed up between regiments and battalions. But I was struck by her mention of regiments because there are no regiments on our side. Finally I realized that he was in an enemy unit. She doesn't make much of a distinction. She says "We're all the same," and perhaps she's right.

The grandson's name is Antonio López Fernández. She's shown me photos of him in his army uniform and his best suit. They'd rather die than let themselves be photographed in everyday clothes. Our Antonio López Fernández looks rather stiff in the photos, with a frontal stare that sorts ill with his forced smile. Touched-up and enlarged (you can see the

X charcoal they used to blacken his hair and eyebrows), Olegaria has them hanging in ~~gilded~~^{gilt} frames in her bedroom. There's one that deserves special mention: the inevitable photo of his First Communion. He's dressed in a sailor suit, while beside him stands a girl of approximately the same age--ten or twelve years old--in a kind of wedding gown, but for a nineteenth-century wedding, incredibly provincial and out-of-date.

"Olegaria, I didn't know you had a granddaughter."

"She's not my granddaughter; she's my sister."

"Your sister? The same age as your grandson?"

X "When she had her First Communion she was, but then the poor thing died . . . That was some sixty years ago. For a while I had a lady boarding here the same as you are now. A real lady: she was our schoolteacher. When she moved to another village, she gave me that frame. And I asked the photographer who came every year to take photos of First Communions if he couldn't put my sister and ~~my~~² grandson together in one picture that would fit in that pretty frame. He charged me twenty duros to make it look like it wasn't two pictures. Now I've got them both together, as if they were standing here before me. Don't they look nice? Those photographers are so good at making pretty pictures, and for only twenty duros . . ."

What a waste of twenty duros, but what can you say? Besides, she's not the village champion when it comes to idiotic pictures. The mayor (the one Major Rosich restored to his post) has an X-ray of his stomach hanging in his dining room: a souvenir from when they removed a tumor. The tumor turned out to be benign, but the X-ray's as repulsive as if it were a real cancer. He's very proud of it and tells everyone that it cost him thirty napoleons. It makes you wonder, and who knows, maybe the mayor's right. Why should a photo of his face be any better than one of

his stomach?

I went to the castle today. Bellota's perking up and has regained her appetite, the farmhand told me. He'd taken the cloth off her because it was too hot. Olivela received me, for the first time, not in the great hall but in the wing where she lives. Since the castle's enormous and she doesn't have a maid, she only uses the few rooms she actually needs, small and with good exposure. I was very curious to see that part of the castle, strictly off-limits to us before. You can see the village roofs, delicate gray with blotches of rusty lichen. The steeple, with its blackened bricks, wells up from that sea of rooftops. If you look up, you can see the castle's eaves jutting out, with a multitude of swallows' and swifts' nests. I counted fifty of them. The mud they're made of has taken on a patina. She told me the birds use the nests over and over again, making minor repairs if they need them, and it's not impossible that some are as old as the roof itself.

This part of the castle was entirely different from what I'd expected. It's not that I'd expected strident luxury and bad taste of the kind one might associate with a "maid who married into the family," since that wouldn't have fit the idea I have of her. Nonetheless, I was surprised by the extreme simplicity.

The place has an atmosphere like a convent. The sitting room where she received me is also their dining room. The bedroom opens onto it: spacious, with only an iron bedstead, a pair of rush-bottomed chairs, and a writing desk from the time of Queen Isabella II. I got a good look at it because the door was wide open. The kitchen must be on one side of the sitting-and-dining room--the door was closed--and on the other is the children's bedroom. The walls ^{are} ~~were~~ simply whitewashed, and the floor ^{is} ~~was~~ plain red-ocher tiles.

X She motioned me to sit down ~~in a cadira de frare~~. There was a round walnut table between us, rather small, which must be where they eat. Naturally we spoke about the miller and his family, since that was the purpose of my visit.

"They came by yesterday. Everything's settled. They'll move in tomorrow."

"I assume Santiago will stop talking about you behind your back."

X ^{sort} ~~person~~ The poor woman started crying in front of me. She's not a bad person; she's just stupid. In these villages more harm is done through stupidity than through malice."

I told her the rumors that were circulating in our battalion: "We may be leaving Olivet. I haven't stayed in one town this long since the war began."

"Poor fellows, it's natural for you to want a little peace and quiet. But Olivet's so small, so dirty, so closed-in, so squalid . . ."

X Neither of us spoke for a moment. She looked out the open window. We could hear the swallows ^{cries} ~~shrilling~~ as they flew back and forth. She gazed off into the distance and then suddenly burst out laughing as she repeated, "so closed-in, so squalid."

J That laugh pained me, and I cut her off almost angrily. "Yes, Olivet is sad, and so are you. But perhaps it's precisely this sadness that attracts me so much. At first I found Olivet oppressive, but now I wouldn't trade its barren fields and ~~treeless~~ ^{told} mountains for the world. There's nothing like the dignified, calm sadness of these steppes occasionally broken by some hermitage on a yellow clay hill with a few cypresses."

"How can you like a place like this?"

"For the same reason that I like sad music or a November evening or a distant memory . . . or a woman with a past."

X She'd stopped laughing, but she looked at me ironically. "We peasants don't fret about things like that. Our worries are ~~more about~~ everyday things: is the pig getting fat, are the hens laying, are the tomatoes ripening, will the salt pork last till next year? Why should we think about anything else? The past . . . As soon as you start remembering, it starts tormenting you. The past is so odd, if you let yourself be sucked into it! At a certain point I did this or that: can it really be possible? What happens to what we said, did, and thought so many years ago? I lived in Barcelona, so I can understand you. You can see I can follow what you're saying. But believe me: a woman with a past is a spent cartridge, and if I missed the target, I'll just have to live with it. It's having a past that really makes a woman old. I'm old, and I'm a failure: that's it in a nutshell. You're deluding yourself if you think there's something romantic about me."

X The late-summer morning sun, streaming in through the window, lit up the cloudy glass on an old rococo mirror ~~hanging~~ on the wall. The reflected rays, as she moved her head, struck her auburn hair, which she wears in a ^{shaky} thick, ~~short~~ braid. As she spoke she sewed a patch on some pants that must belong to her younger son. They're always out playing in the morning. I got up to leave. I would have liked to say something because I felt I couldn't let her last words go unanswered, but nothing occurred to me.

"God knows," I muttered, "that no other woman . . ."

And I don't know what else I said, if in fact I managed to say something else.

X "Thank you, you're very gallant," she replied without looking up from her sewing. "You were brought up in Barcelona, where people make a point of saying nice things to women my age. I remember from when I lived

there. And even when one knows it's only said out of politeness, one is always grateful for a kind word."

"You think I said that to be polite?"

I defended myself vehemently, though I couldn't even remember what I'd said. She glanced up at me suspiciously.

"Of course: to be polite. Why else would you say it?"

She peered at me as though trying to fathom my intentions. I realized that I shouldn't insist, and besides, at that moment her eyes distracted me. Her eyes--I suddenly noticed--aren't black, which was what for some reason I'd always thought they were. Seen close up, they're gray: a gray at once shadowy and metallic.

"You're very young," she said slowly, certainly aware of my agitation and looking out the window. Her voice grew solemn and distant as it had been on that first evening, when I'd seen her outlined against the sunset. "I'm old enough to be your mother."

"Don't be silly! I have a four-year-old son. I'm almost thirty!"

"And how old do you think I am?"

I hesitated for a second, and without giving me time to reply she whispered, "I'm over forty."

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Again I had the unpleasant feeling of being a short man speaking with a taller woman. She went back to her sewing.

"You're a well brought up young man who knows how to behave around women. It's a shame that you won't have many chances to shine in these villages. A lot of people would take it the wrong way . . ."

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"Please don't talk in ~~this~~ tone of voice . . . It hurts me. I have the impression that you're confusing me with someone else."

"Someone else? What do you mean?"

"I'm not talking about anyone in particular. I'm not a well brought up young man. In fact, I'm just the opposite. For a year I've been dragging myself through this war. Take it as you like, but I . . . Olivela . . ."

"You're all very strange. Why can't you understand? What do you all want from me? Before you came, I lived peacefully in this castle, a ruin in a ruin. The anarchists saw it more clearly than you do; they called me 'the old lady in the haunted house.' And I didn't mind. They left me alone in my corner. They respected me."

"I'd be very sorry if you thought I didn't respect you."

"That's not what I meant," and for the first time, in her tone of voice and that sparkling gaze that again met mine as she looked up from her work, I thought I detected some hint of tenderness or gratitude.

"I'd be very sorry indeed, believe me, Olivela. As sorry as I am that you think of me in the plural, as if in your eyes I were nothing more than another soldier in this battalion, one of many who are here today and tomorrow ~~will be God knows where.~~"

"I didn't mean it that way. I wasn't thinking of your battalion. I was thinking of Soleràs."

"Soleràs? One day you asked me never to mention him."

"Yes: it's better not to mention him. It really is."

An awkward silence fell.

"Well, then let's not talk about him," I finally said. "We've talked enough for one day," I added, seizing the opportunity to beat a dignified retreat. "I hope you'll realize that I want to be your friend, and if there's anything I can do . . ."

This banal expression, uttered for want of something better to say, produced an unexpected reaction. She stared at me in silence, as though these words had suddenly given her an idea.

"Would you be willing to do something for me? For example, if I asked you for something, something you could do, a little favor that would make a big difference to me? . . ."

"Don't doubt it for a minute. For you . . ."

"The fact is," she interrupted me, "that you're the masters of this town, since Olivel is considered part of the front and therefore under military jurisdiction. If you wanted to, you could take away my castle and lands and the mill in Albernes and the mare and even the few sticks of furniture I own. You could also do just the opposite. The little favor I'd ask of you (not now; some other time) would be easy for you to do since you're a lawyer. We'll discuss it another day."

"But why not now?"

"Because I can see you're too nervous. Look at the way your hands are trembling."

I again looked into her eyes of dark steel. "What can she want from me?" I wondered. And suddenly I realized that she might be thinking the same thing about me, but she'd picked up the pants she'd left in her lap and was no longer looking at me. She sewed deftly, having threaded the needle and snapped the thread between her teeth. I realized that the scent of clean linen is part of the atmosphere that surrounds her, the scent of sheets lovingly starched, pressed, and stored away with sprigs of lavender in cedar or walnut chests. As I descended the staircase--the only part of the castle made of stone--the cool air from the bottom floor, with its smells of wine, straw, and pine and savin firewood, replaced the scent of sheets and hope chests.

Today Oligaria made a mortajo for lunch. It's their great regional specialty--disgusting, of course, but you have to act as if it were nectar and ambrosia.

It consists of a lamb's stomach filled with the same unfortunate beast's intestines, sewn up, and boiled for hours on end. When they unsew it before serving it, a gust of air escapes with a stench like a steam locomotive: a stench of warm guts that would daunt the boldest spirit.

Needless to say, the smell attracts battalions and even brigades of flies.

August 11

X I was returning from one of my trips to the monastery, and as I passed a house on the outskirts of town I heard a violin playing. It was something by Chopin, but did Chopin write anything for solo violin? In any case, it was very well played, with great delicacy. The sun was setting, and the music seemed to fuse with the splendors, the scents and exquisite agonies of the dusk. Summer's drawing to an end, and every year when ~~that~~ ^{this} occurs, something dies in us. That downpour was the beginning of the end. Since then, I've sometimes had to sleep beneath a blanket. But who the hell was playing the violin?

I asked the paramedic, who stared at me in surprise.

"Don't you know? It's the doctor."

"Is there a village doctor here?"

"Our doctor: Doctor Puig! Have you been living on the moon? He plays like an angel."

"That drunkard? I thought all he cared about was booze."

"You're mistaken. He's a very sensitive fellow."

"I suppose he drinks to forget."

"Why not? Some phrases get to be clichés precisely because they're true."

"Humph! . . . And what about the major?"

"A wonderful person."

"I'm not discussing that, Cruells. What I mean is: does he drink to forget too?"

"Of course! Everyone who drinks drinks to forget."

"To forget what?"

"Usually they can't remember."

He was dead serious. His tortoise-shell glasses made him look more like an owl than ever as he tried to convince me that the doctor, the major, Gallart, Ponsetti and the whole "Baby Bottle Club" (the major's term) drinks to drown its terror of the void, "the first step toward religion," in wine.

"So that's what they're all staggering toward," I replied.

"I get the impression," he insisted, "that you haven't noticed that void, that you're still unaware of it."

"Do you think it would help if I got drunk more often?"

"Forget it."

#

I received a letter from Trini: a letter that reminded me of my conversation with Cruells. "I'm sure you'll understand one day. Up till now, you've run away from happiness as though it terrified you." "If you were willing, we could start now, in spite of everything, in spite of being so far apart and all the bad times you've put me through." "You still don't realize that I exist. I don't mean you don't love me, but you live as though I didn't exist. Excuse me for saying this, but sometimes I can't stand it and need to get things off my chest. It doesn't bother you to be all alone in the world, or at least you haven't realized that it bothers you. I, on the other hand, can't bear it. I haven't had a word from you in over a month ..."

A month . . . yes, it must have been about that long.

X Ramon, I have a vague suspicion that I'm a perfect scoundrel. Much more than the doctor, who at least plays the violin. Soleràs himself would look like a saint compared to me. You have no idea what my life's been like since you left. Even entering the Brothers Hospitalers can hurt someone else! You left me so alone in that house . . . Do you remember that double bed where we slept together when we were little? Sometimes I'd wake up scared and to get over my fear of the dark I'd clutch the tail on your nightshirt. If you knew how many times I've missed that tail since then! You told me stories about our father. You'd known him, you knew how he'd died in ^{Morocco,} ~~Africa~~, without grand gestures or phrases, simply, like someone doing his job. Didn't you ever suspect that when you went away you left me alone, like a kid lost in the woods? No one else has ever talked to me about our father except in offhand comments, half-unfinished and painful to hear. And Julieta scared me, with those eyes that seemed to suck ^I me into them and that mouth like a fish that I felt on mine all of a sudden, one evening in the yard. We still used to play there with her, Josep-Maria, and other classmates from our school. Our cousin Josep-Maria, poor fatty with his squeaky voice. I don't think he noticed how dense the air in that yard got as night fell. I wouldn't want to insult him by thinking he noticed, since one of the girls, Julieta, was his sister. I couldn't abide Julieta. I already couldn't abide her when we were fourteen years old, because I thought she was silly and she got on my nerves. And that kiss on the lips, which I hadn't expected . . . It's funny how a kiss, such a little thing, can be so ^{meaningful} ~~resonant~~ at the moment when we stop being children. It revealed an aspect of life that still repels me: female sensuality.

X A sensual woman seems to me like a monster.

X All that feels like a thousand years ago, and it's only been ten or twelve! How can we change so quickly? Trini, on the other hand, seemed never to have gone through that shadowy transition. She seemed to have changed from a girl into a young woman without even noticing. The group her family belonged to published a little newspaper called Blast, perhaps the only anarchist periodical in Catalan. I didn't mind writing for it and even selling it in the street with Soleràs and Trini, but I could never bring myself to read it. On the other hand, I never forgot to mail it to our uncle every week. After all, it was to annoy him, or mainly to annoy him, that I'd become an anarchist. One day, when we were sitting around chatting after lunch, he told me to come to his office later that afternoon.

X I'm sure you remember those depressing black leather armchairs and that bust of Dante on the filing cabinet. Our uncle was discussing something with his accountant. I had to wait ~~for~~ ^I a long time in one of those armchairs, trying to figure out what Dante had to do with soup noodles. The accountant left. Our uncle finally looked up at me, half mockingly and half pityingly. He pulled a newspaper out of his inside pocket. Needless to say, it was the latest issue of Blast, with a long article I'd written.

"Do you think I'm losing sleep over this? I suppose the bit about 'fattening pigs for slaughter' was written with me in mind. Someday you'll be ashamed of signing this garbage! You're too dumb to realize that, as your guardian, I can send you to a reformatory . . ."

X The word burst upon me as though it ~~was~~ ^I were haloed with glory. I'd be a martyr in Trini's eyes. Uncle Eusebi kept talking. Now I understand that business about a reformatory was just to scare me, but at the time I took it seriously. He often stopped to examine papers, figures, telegrams, that

"Bah, our man in Caracas. If you don't watch your step, you'll get more 'free love' that you've bargained for. To make a long story short, dear nephew, I don't have much time to worry about your doings. I want the stockholders to vote to expand the firm. Things are going well, you know, but I have to write a good report, weigh my words, check and double-check all the figures." He lit a cigar, leaned back in his chair, and closed his inexpressive businessman's eyes. "So I don't have much time to worry about your doings. What a pity you make me waste it on such nonsense when here," and he pointed to the stack of letters and telegrams, "there are hundreds of thousands of duros involved. So here's the story: I was thinking of locking you up in a boarding school to save you from a disastrous marriage, which is how free love usually ends, but I talked it over with Father Gallifa and he was against it. He says if I lock you up I'll ruin everything. He believes"--and Uncle Eusebi laughed as though it were the funniest idea in the world--"that you're more of a Christian than

any of us, including him."

Father Gallifa! I'd forgotten all about that old Jesuit. Do you remember those "chats" every Sunday after Mass? Poor fellow; they were so boring! The truth is, I was disappointed. I wouldn't be a martyr; there would be no reformatory. But the business about Father Gallifa had made an impression on me. I went to see him as soon as I left the office. That monastery on Casp Street is so nearby . . . He received me in his cell, which still exhaled the cramped, stuffy smell that you called the "odor of sanctity" when you still allowed yourself that kind of joke. The night table, the rush-bottomed chair, the little iron bedstead like a child's: everything was the same as when you and I used to go there. He sat down on the bed, leaving me the chair. He seemed to have aged a lot since the last time I'd seen him.

"I've come to thank you, not to hear a sermon."

"I'm not interested in your thanks; keep them. All I ask is that you hear me out for a while, not long. I know you've always thought I was a pain."

His inferiority complex disarmed me. He looked like a poor uncle about to ask a rich and successful nephew for a loan.

2x "Maybe you don't realize that I'm also a bit of an anarchist." He smiled as if he'd just made a joke. "Those papal encyclicals on social issues . . ."

"Father Gallifa," I interrupted him, "if you knew how boring I find the industrial revolution, the proletariat, surplus value, planned economies . . ."

"But aren't you an anarchist?"

"How should I know? What does it mean to be an anarchist? If I knew what it was, what I want; if you knew how little I care about all

that . . . Anarchism! It was Soleràs's idea, and all he cares about is having fun . . ."

24 Father Gallifa's weary, reddened eyes gradually went from surprise to shock, from shock to sadness. "Poor Lluís . . . since you're involved in it, for whatever reason (~~who~~^{is} is this Soleràs? ~~A~~^a classmate?), you should take advantage off the opportunity to study these problems in depth, take them seriously. I'm worried about you, Lluís, not because you're an anarchist but because you're not enough of one--I mean, because you're not doing it in good faith. Good faith can make up for a lot of things. Anarchism has some excellent points, if you know how to choose them. You . . ."

I started laughing, so absurd did I find that apologia for anarchism in the mouth of a Jesuit. He smiled wistfully, and for a second his face looked like that of a blind man, a blind beggar who used to ask for money in front of the Bethlehem Church.

X "Your uncle says you take long strolls with a girl, a student. All I know is what he told me, that she's an anarchist, that she has ~~harmful~~^{bad} ideas. You know what my advice is? Love her with all your heart; love her as much as you can. If you can't believe in anything else, at least believe in anarchism. The main thing ~~is~~^{are} to believe and to love. If you believe in something, if you love with all your heart, eventually you'll find the right path."

X He looked at me again with that sad, weary, supplicating expression. "Lluís, are you sure you love her, that you won't leave her?"

When I was outside again, the only thing I felt was shame at having wept. I thought of Trini's family, of the people who put out Blast. "Thank God they can't see me." As for Trini, I wouldn't mention that idiotic conversation to her.

The next day we were walking through Ciutadella Park. We sat down

on a bench, beneath some bare, leafless linden trees, not far from that statue of General Prim on horseback. The park was damp, chilly, and empty. Its smell of rotting leaves was like a wave of melancholy. I felt old; my twentieth birthday was approaching.

"I'll do whatever I like. They had to back down."

But a mocking voice inside me asked, "What about Father Gallifa?" I told her the Jesuit had taken my side without going into details, but between one thing and another, the whole story came out, as though I were talking to myself. I think it was because she was listening so raptly. She was sixteen. And the thing I'd most wanted to hide from her slipped out: that I'd cried at the end.

"You see, I was a coward, but the worst part is that I looked ridiculous!"

Trini didn't say anything. And then I told her about you, Ramon, because though she'd heard about Jesuits--and you can imagine what kind of stories--she didn't even know who Saint John of God was. She was all ears. I hadn't even mentioned you to her. Isn't that disgraceful? Ramon, if you could have seen her eyes! They're not pretty eyes; no, a kind of nondescript green: round, ordinary, everyday eyes, but they gaze at you with that childish credulity, ready to believe anything as long as it's good, noble, generous . . .

III

Six bulls were in the bullring.
 None was any good.
 That's why they burned the convents
 In my neighborhood.

Popular song, 1835

August 13

Captain Picó has organized a group of officers who'll cook and eat together. It's the second one. The major and the doctor founded the first a few days ago, with Captain Gallart and the Orator as charter members.

The great Picó has hoisted his antialcoholic banner, and since he smokes a pipe, his pipe has become the new brotherhood's symbol, as opposed to the baby bottle our competitors have chosen as their emblem. The ex-doorman discovered a cook from the Hotel Colón among the gunners who answers to the name Pepet, like so many other misunderstood geniuses, and who's taciturn and serious. Poor Olegaria could never compete with such an exotic specimen, so I rushed to join the "Pipe Club." Needless to say, the paramedic also embraced our cause, along with two lieutenants from the gunners' company. We could have had something approaching Plato's republic, but at the last moment an intruder appeared. Like all intruders, at first he seemed like a real pearl.

This new hero of the Catalan Army arrived in Olivel a couple of weeks ago. We thought he was going to set up our signal corps, since that's what our major kept asking for and that's what we needed. The major, who as usual had had a few too many, glanced at his papers and limited himself to finding out that the man's last name was Rebull. He showed up in shirtsleeves, without stripes or any other sign of rank and with a big pipe between his teeth: teeth so white they looked like an

advertisement for toothpaste. The shirt was impeccable; the teeth were dazzling, but best of all, he was haloed by that air of cultivation that adheres to all signal corps officers. "A genuine man of the world," our major declared.

As for Picó, he shrewdly kept quiet, but he used every trick in the book to keep this priceless gem from swelling the ranks of the Baby Bottle Club. Now we'd be happy to give them our acquisition. He turned out to be a poet. He recites his own verses, and I'll be hanged if any of us can make head or tail of them. Over lunch he tells us we're narrow minded, that Baudelaire's old hat and that we lack "feminine sensibility." He also tells us we don't know how to smoke a pipe properly and gives long lectures on the subject, but the worst of all is that he knows nothing about communications. He's . . . a political commissar!

When we finally got the point, our consternation couldn't have been greater.

X It's not that he's a Communist. He's not even a socialist. That wasn't what appalled us. It was the threat of more political blather, more courses in democracy, lessons on our civic rights and duties, and in fact, a few days later he summoned the entire battalion--major, officers, noncoms, and soldiers--to the great hall in the castle and made us sit through an extremely pompous speech about fascism and ~~R~~epublicanism. Halfway through this speech, when we could hardly keep our eyes open, the major suddenly stood up, red-faced, and with a sweep of his hand exclaimed, "We're the good guys and they're the bad guys: that's all there is to it! We already know that, you don't have to tell us, and we're sick of hearing about it. So shut your trap and set up our signal corps or we'll make you wish you had! If you don't know anything about it, find out quick!"

Something else happened in our battalion that was a lot more

interesting to me. It turns out that Cruells also knows Father Gallifa, or "Doctor Gallifa," as he calls him. There's really nothing remarkable about the fact that we both knew him without knowing each other, but it struck us as an amazing coincidence. He told me some things I hadn't known: that on account of the laws against the Jesuits Father Gallifa had to leave the monastery and move in with his brother, who owns property near Vic or in the Guillerries area and who lives in an old apartment on the Riera del Pi. He says he lived there as a kind of lay priest and was teaching at the seminary, which was how they met and why Cruells calls him Doctor Gallifa. It sounds so strange to me, "Doctor Gallifa"! I also have a lot of trouble imagining him outside his cell. Now that Cruells realizes I know him, he always wants to talk about him. "But he's such an interesting person," he assures me, astonished that I could find those Sunday "chats" tedious.

X *her phrasing*
The days and weeks drag by, and I try to amuse myself with local gossip, but often I don't feel all there. I feel empty, floating, as though someone had knocked me half unconscious. I can't stop thinking about the letter Olivela sent me. This woman is disconcerting: sending me a letter, when she lives right around the corner! It was postmarked Mora de Albullores--no idea where that is. Who mailed it for her? It wasn't signed or dated, and ~~the style~~ *her phrasing* is so ambiguous that I couldn't understand a thing. She listed the monks who'd been murdered: "These were definitely killed, since their bodies were found." And she reminded me of that famous favor she'd asked for: "It would be so easy for you to do." So easy . . . first of all, I don't really know what she wants. I still visit the monastery almost every day. I rummage through the books, I search for documents in the sacristy, in the cells. A huge monastery, sacked, burnt, and finally left open and abandoned during months and months . . . Worst of all, she

forbade me to call on her till I found that certificate: "Don't try to see me; I won't receive you." This prohibition excited me to the point where I lost all self-respect. I wrote to her--I don't even know what I wrote! I was drunk, but on what? Is this what they call a grand passion? In any case, it's something I've never felt before! I don't know what a feeling like this is good for. All I know is it's been such a longing that even if I had to endure the cruelest tortures, I'd want her as much or even more .

..

X I was in the monastery's sacristy, where the air seemed as dense and still as stagnant water. The world felt far away, as though I were really floating in air as thick as water. The sacristy smells of old cedar; a dry smell, slightly sour; a smell . . . of her. She has a few ~~gray~~^{white} hairs, maybe four; I've counted four. I was standing close to her, I smelled her hair's cedar-smell, and those four fine, surprising, shameless strands glittered like the ones spiders weave during the night and that we spot first thing in the morning, ~~thanks to~~^{agitter with} dewdrops the sun hasn't burned away. Very X tenuous, very fine, but the strands of a morning spiderweb are so fragile, whereas those four strands . . . She'd turned her back to me as she picked up a piece of fabric from the table, and I was tempted to kiss her neck, right under her ear. I didn't do it, and now I wish I had. I could have felt, beneath my lips, the pulsing of her blood--her blood, which must be a warm, luxuriant red. She would have turned around brusquely, and in her eyes I would have read an immense surprise--probably feigned, since I'm sure she expects me to make a move some time or other . . . The smell in the sacristy comes from a big wardrobe, which is made of cedar and is now completely empty and where they must have kept their holy vessels and vestments. The sacristy looks out on the main altar's right side, where the pulpit is. In my search for this mysterious certificate, I'd examined the

inside of that huge wardrobe, and when I turned around, almost dizzy from the smell of cedar and incense, I spied the bride and groom. I could only see the two of them through the doorway leading into the church.

X Is that what she'll be one day? The hot, luxuriant red of a pomegranate flower, the smell of cedar and incense on her hair; will it all lead to this unfathomable paralysis? A kind of automatism led me out of the sacristy; and I found myself standing before that sinister grimace, with those eyes gazing up like someone who knows a grotesque secret and pretends he doesn't. It's strange. Apparently in this monastery they didn't close the corpses' eyes. They look at you, but they don't see you . . . And that stiff face before me, with its cunning, twisted grimace. I thought of Soleràs and things he'd said that ^{had} seemed like ravings but now made sense. Because between my thirst and the forbidden fountain stood that mummy: not that one but my own, the one I'll be someday. And the one she'll be. A dull resentment welled up in me against that cynical face, and my mouth filled with spit . . .

August 14

X 2X Picó has just discovered that Rebull is not only a political commissar instead of a signal corps officer but that he's from the Flatfoot Brigade. He was a company commissar; now they've palmed ^h him off on us, promoted to battalion commissar. We also finally found out what party he represents: the ~~Federal~~ ^{Federalist} Nationalist Republican Leftist Party of Empordà. Incredible though it may seem (and what could seem incredible to us now, after everything we've seen and still are seeing), among the hundreds of parties that exist to poison our lives there's one with this name.

As far as the "Flatfoot Brigade" is concerned, perhaps this would be a good time to explain about this brigade I mention so often. It's the

second brigade in our division (ours is the first), and they say--though since I wasn't there I couldn't swear to it--that during our last operations their commander said they couldn't take part since, as he put it in his communiqué: "Most of our men are flat-footed despite their physical exams and couldn't handle a long march." Currently, this brigade covers the part of the front to our south. Between them and us, as I've suggested, there's been some rivalry ever since the war began, due in large part to political squabbles. They're more radical than we are.

Ever since our political commissar arrived, the major, to upset him, has been pressing his idea of "restoring order in the monastery."

"Our brigade is fighting for culture and hygiene; we're not like the flatfeet," he says, glancing at the commissar out of the corner of his eye. "One day we'll restore those saintly mummies"--those were his very words--"to their niches with pomp and ceremony. Culture's not worth a bean without funerals. We should start considering which march would be most appropriate, and whether it would be a good idea to make those who opened the tombs seal them up again as a fitting way to make amends to the deceased, since even though they are deceased, they deserve every consideration."

Needless to say, Rebull, as our political commissar, is obliged to pretend he's enthusiastic about this idea. As for the funeral march, which has been a subject of great controversy, you have to realize that our battalion, which lacks artillery, has a marching band. And it's because of disagreements over the march that we still haven't performed the ceremony. It turns out that Picó, in the good old days when he was in the foreign legion, played the trombone for a few weeks in their band. It's not that he reads music. In fact, he can't read a note, but he can play "The Death of Ase" from Peer Gynt by ear, something that fills him with

justifiable pride. He often hums it for us when we're sitting around after a meal, lest we doubt his past musical glories. As for the major, he's a fanatical Wagnerian and therefore favors the funeral march from Siegfried. It was left up to Doctor Puig, who couldn't care less and washed his hands of the whole affair. He assured us that in any case, he preferred Verdi to Wagner. "At least Verdi had a sense of humor." On days when the band rehearses, he locks himself in the medical supply room and closes the shutters so as not to hear it. There, on his violin, he plays Chopin's funeral march.

August 16

Since yesterday was Olivet's yearly festival, we invited the major and Doctor Puig to lunch at our club. They arrived at one on the dot and kept winking at each other. What were they hatching? Picó kept his eye on them throughout the meal without neglecting his pedaling. The great Picó has dreamed up an invention to keep the flies away. "A practical guy," as Soleràs said. It consists of a paper screen, as big as the table and suspended from the ceiling by a cord. A frame keeps it rigid. The cord goes around a pulley, and its other end is attached to a pedal. Sitting at the head of the table like a paterfamilias, Picó works the pedal, and the paper screen goes up and down, dispersing the clouds of flies. Before this brilliant discovery, whole handfuls of them fell in our soup.

The conversation ranged over many subjects. The doctor explained that the day before he'd been summoned to Castel de Olivo by the brigade's medical corps.

"The chief had recieved a letter from headquarters. Imagine: in our division, in fact, in the Flatfoot Brigade . . ."

He glanced at the commissioner, winked at the major, and coughed

discreetly.

"Well, my learned colleague," the major said, "what were you saying about the notorious Flatfoot Brigade?"

"Mictionis cerulea . . . an extremely rare disease! There's only been one known case to date, but what a case! Phenomenal! The victim felt nothing. In fact, he'd never felt better in his life! 'No one would have expected such behavior from him,' as Dostoyevsky put it. One morning, two days ago, he woke to find that his uniform no longer fit him. He tried to dress himself, but in vain! He'd swelled up overnight! He couldn't button his pants. The buttons on his fly (if you'll pardon the expression) were nearly a foot ~~away~~ ^{from} from their respective buttonholes . . . Aren't we even allowed to use the word 'fly' in this brigade? And his urine, hmm, his urine was blue. Blue: now pay close attention. An infallible symptom. Blue urine! A few hours later, he was in his death throes!"

"What dreadful symptoms!" exclaimed the major. "But what can you expect from the Flatfoot Brigade? I always suspected they were infested with every disease known to man. What's your opinion, Rebull? Being a political commissar, I wouldn't be surprised if you'd read Hegel's complete works!"

"Hegel's out of date," the commissar pontificated. And for the time being no more was said about the deadly mictionis cerulea, since the subject shifted to Hegel's influence on Marx's Das Kapital, a subtle philosophical question that, as you can imagine, we find tremendously exciting.

Today--of course--Rebull showed up at daybreak, in his pajamas. He was pale, sweating with fear, his eyes popping out of his head.

"The poor guy," Cruells said, "I really felt sorry for him. I walked him back to his room. In his water glass, on his night table, you could

still see traces of coerulein, a harmless substance that turns urine blue. And you could see someone had taken the stitches out of the waistband on his pants and then sewn it up again, not very well . . ."

August 17

One evening, I went back to that crossroad where I'd seen her the first time. It hasn't even been two months, but it feels like forever. Two months can be like two thousand years. That evening two months ago seems as far-off as the first evening ever, and the memory of her sudden appearance as deep as my remotest memories.

X I stayed there till it was dark. Some night bird--perhaps a whippoorwill--seemed to glide rather than fly, skimming along above the ground. It ~~squatted~~ ^{alighted} in the middle of the path as though it were waiting for me, but when I approached it took flight again, as silently as a moth. The heat of the day quickly dissipated, and the breeze brought a sour smell of woods that made me think of her hair. As long as there was any trace of light I felt like a bow stretched taut, and my head ached. As the darkness thickened, it was as if a weight had been lifted from my chest, as if the bow had gone limp.

After supper, I went out for a stroll. Outside the window to the tavern, Gallart was playing a guitar. Where did he get it?

"Melitona, would you like to hear a romantic ballad from my country?"

And with infinite melancholy, he began to croon that Catalan song kids sing when they're hungry:

We want bread and butter;

Bread and butter's what we want.

August 18

I went to the mill in Albernes to see how those good souls are faring. The mill looks more like a castle than the castle itself. The walls on the channel are made of limestone that five centuries of sun have turned golden (and I say "five centuries" because there's a date above the front door). The miller's house, right next to the channel, is also made of stone with an arched door and a single mullioned window. It looks out on some broad, irrigated fields, with a fountain that's hidden beneath a trellis covered with thick grapevines. The water flows along a bronze gutter the years have turned green and fills a tank made of reddish jasper. The tank is rough-hewn, its sides worn away by the muzzles of all the animals who've bent over to drink and all the jugs that have been filled there. I gather that until the Cortes of Cádiz abolished feudal privileges, the peasants attached to the castle were forced to take their wheat to this mill.

The miller and his family welcomed me with great joy and told me "her ladyship" was "up there by the dam." I certainly wasn't expecting to find her there, and I was scared she's be angry.

"Her ladyship won't like it if you don't say hello . . ."

How anxious they are to please "her ladyship" and to make sure I do the same! Needless to say, they had no idea that she'd forbidden me to see her, and I certainly couldn't explain it to them. They pointed out the rugged path that winds up from the irrigated fields to the millpond.

It's a pretty spot, as carefully tended as a garden. The pond reflects a weeping willow and a savin grove in the distance, halfway up the hill. The children were swimming. She was keeping an eye on them, sitting on a stone bench beneath the willow.

She had her back to me, so she couldn't see me approach. Not to be

wasting time, she was mending some piece of clothing, bent over her work. The two little boys screamed and splashed each other. Their small bodies, covered with drops, shone like burnished copper, and the rays of sunlight filtering through the willow's leaves made the spray iridescent.

I silently approached her, treading on the soft grass that grows along the sides of the irrigation channel, which flowed along merrily with a sound like tinkling bells.

"Good afternoon. I wasn't expecting to see you in Albernes."

She turned around with a start.

"You?"

Her dark eyes seemed to say, "I wasn't expecting you either."

"Do you have that certificate?" she whispered after I'd sat down beside her, obviously worried that the children would hear her. The certificate? I couldn't focus my mind on anything; that smell of night-woods, those flashing eyes . . .

"You won't answer me?"

"The what?" I stammered like a fool.

The certificate? What certificate? Her perfume of woods and nighttime, those dazzling eyes . . .

"I've turned the monastery upside down"--I tried hard to concentrate on what I was saying--"and I can't find anything that remotely resembles this certificate. Believe me; I'm sorry. Couldn't you give me a clue? You can't imagine how many books and papers are strewn around there."

Her steely gaze went from surprise to shock, from shock to mockery, and from mockery to a mixture of pity and contempt. She let out a weary sigh and said, "I can see I can't rely on you."

"But you won't give me even a hint of where this document might be"--and again I had that unpleasant feeling of speaking to a woman taller

than myself.

"If you won't try to understand . . . how can you expect me to be understanding with you if you won't do the same with me."

Her mocking gaze had turned into a brilliant flash of light loaded with vague promises, with a kind of confused complicity. My head was spinning.

"I understand. I'm beginning to understand. You're made of ice, and precisely because you're made of ice . . ."

"Don't go any further. Right now all I care about is that certificate. My children's future depends on it. Now leave me; we've said everything we have to say to each other. You're a gentlemanly, well brought up young man. I have complete faith in you in this respect. You won't betray a helpless woman who's in trouble."

A helpless woman? Anything but! I'm writing in my room--the bedroom that belonged to Olegaria's grandson, Antonio López Fernández, whom I don't know and perhaps will never meet. The setting sun's last wine-colored ray filters through a crack in the shutters and comes to rest on her letter. A letter on ruled paper of the kind servants use. Her penmanship shows she's not used to writing. The letters are big, irregular, painfully traced, printed. But by no means is it a letter from a "helpless woman"! On my table, her spelling mistakes silently exhale the cool, clean scent of mown hay.

Eppur si muove

August 19

It's puzzling how absent-minded we can be at times. For example: how could I have passed through that cell with the bees so often without noticing something written in charcoal on the wall? It's in enormous letters and says: Eppur si muove.

Eppur si muove. Did the anarchists write that to show they were avenging Galileo? I doubt that the anarchists on the committee in Olivella de la Virgen had ever heard of Galileo or had a very clear notion of astronomy. So who would have taken the trouble to sully the wall with this learned citation? I'm mystified.

The most remarkable thing is the following: on the floor, right below the inscription, was a folio volume that I'd never seen before, and yet it stood out so clearly, all by itself, separate from the piles of books, its boards covered with studded parchment. On the spine one can read, handwritten in Gothic letters: Book of Obituaries. These are monks' obituaries from 1605 till the very eve of the cataclysm. It turns out that on July 17, 1936, one of them died of natural causes. Ah, the good old days when monks died in their beds!

How could I have overlooked such an enormous tome?

After the last obituary the pages are blank (starting approximately halfway through the volume), and it wouldn't have occurred to me to look further if I hadn't seen a piece of red cardboard sticking out toward the back. I opened the volume again and found a new title page: Book of Weddings Devoutly Celebrated in the Church at the Monastery of Our Lady of Mercy by Dispensation of the Bishop and the Most Reverend Parish

Priests. Anno Domini 1613.

My heart was pounding like a hammer against an anvil. Suddenly, everything fell into place. The Virgin of Olivet--as my hostess had told me in Castel de Olivo--is worshipped around here and is considered the patroness of happy marriages. On a small scale, she's like our Virgin of Montserrat. Both out of general piety and because of this devout belief, some couples asked permission to marry in the monastery instead of the brides' parish churches, as canon law stipulates. The monks kept a register of such weddings, though there weren't very many: fifty-seven since the first one, celebrated in 1613.

August 20

Today I was invited to lunch at the Baby Bottle Club. Toward the end of the meal, while the others were having coffee, the major pulled me aside and led me to his room.

"Listen, Lluís," and he placed his finger on his lips, which is how his drunken monologues usually begin. "I'm going to let you in on a secret, a terrible secret! If the Flatfoot Brigade knew . . ."

Swaying slightly, he carefully shut the door, looked under the bed and each of the chairs to make sure no spies from our rival brigade were present and, satisfied that we were alone, lay down on his mattress. He did all this without letting go of a baby owl, a nestling, he'd "caught," as he put it, the night before in an olive grove.

"It's an owl I harvested myself, you know? But it can put away whole swarms of flies. I don't know if I can find enough to satisfy it. Those guys"--and he waved his hand vaguely toward the dining room--"are a bunch of worthless boozers. They go from one drunk to another like bees from flower to flower. Don't tell anyone"--and he again placed his finger

on his lips--"but I filled their sugar bowl with salt."

"Major, I know some secrets that are even more astonishing."

"More astonishing? Where are they? Under the bed?"

"No; they're in the monastery in Olivet."

"Those mummies!" He stared in my direction.

"They're not mummies, major. Fortunately, they're alive and healthy.

Two charming little children."

"I don't like hearing about mummies, Lluís."

It was hard to get him on the track I wanted. I thought that a horseback ride might dissipate part of his drunkenness. I wanted him to be a little tipsy, but not so drunk he couldn't think straight.

"Major, only you can give these kids a name. Think of Marieta . . . without her father . . ."

Now his small, dark eyes stared straight into mine as they filled with tears.

"Marieta doesn't want them to kill her daddy! She wouldn't like that one bit!"

"Well then, put on your riding boots, major. There's no time to lose."

I pulled them on him while he docilely submitted without letting go of his owl. In the dining room they were spitting out coffee, making faces and roaring with laughter. They didn't see us leave.

The major's horse, which he almost never rides, is as light as Bellota. We galloped all the way. Once we were in the sacristy, he sat down on the floor. He was too sozzled to stand.

"I'll make the band learn the most solemn funeral march I can find. You can't kid around with dead people. Who the hell does Picó think he is? I'm in charge here; not him."

"You couldn't be more right, but listen . . ."

He let out an enormous, winey belch, protracted and resonant. It seemed to calm him, as though that belch had cleared his head.

"I'm a Wagnerian, you know? I like funeral marches to be funereal. Nothing else will do! Christ, what a lot of mummies . . ."

It was now or never.

"Major, in this wardrobe is a register of deaths and weddings. Please: try and pay attention. The future of two innocent children is at stake."

This made a bigger impression on him than I'd expected. He read and reread the last item in the register while two big tears rolled down his cheeks.

"And to think those hags in Olivet, those old gossips, call them bastards . . . But why didn't she tell us?"

"She was afraid no one would believe her. And besides, it was a purely religious wedding. Think about it, major: before us it was the anarchists. We don't have a very good reputation either. They don't exactly think of us as Jesuits."

X "I'm going to force every man in my battalion to pray ^{on} ~~with~~ a rosary. What the hell do they think this is?"

"Yes, major. We all realize how much you've done to reestablish order and bring culture . . . but in spite of everything they've palmed off a political commissar on us, and to make things worse, one from the Flatfoot Brigade! In one moment, all the respect we'd tried so hard to win . . ."

"We'll scare him the hell away, Lluís. Just you wait and see! Leave it to me! I'll deliver all of you from this commissar! I'm your father, God damn it! I'm in charge of this battalion! I'm looking out for you. It was me, you know, while he was sleeping, who unsewed his pants and sewed them up again. The doctor wanted to help, but he'd had too much to drink and couldn't thread the needle, though he stared at it till he was cross-

X eyed. I had to take care of that delicate bit of fancy ^{needlework} ~~sewing~~."

"While we're waiting to get that leech of a commissar off our backs, we must see that justice is done. Why do you think she didn't say anything? Imagine: the prior and the other four monks who were witnesses were executed the very next day, and she may not realize that the prior, before he was killed, had noted the wedding in this register."

"But some of them escaped into the woods. Everyone says so."

"Yes, major. I also hoped that one of them was among the witnesses. They're all dead as doornails. I've checked on it. The villagers identified the bodies."

"The surviving monks, even though they didn't sign the book, could still testify that the wedding took place."

"The wedding was celebrated after the survivors had fled. As for the people who stayed on, remember that the anarchists even shot the hired hands. The monks hired them out of charity. They were so poor they couldn't even afford shoes."

All this had shaken him out of his stupor. His eyes sparkled energetically.

"How do you know all this? Were you there?"

X Olivela told me; she told me all about it. The anarchist committee had shot the village priest. The man she lived with, Enrique, was scared they'd do the same to him, and with good reason! He was planning to escape, but knowing he'd be killed if he was caught, he felt some pangs of conscience. He decided to marry the mother of his children before making his getaway. He couldn't do it in Olivela, since the priest was dead; all that was left was the monastery. The guys from the committee, none of whom was from around here, still didn't know it existed. The villagers kept it secret because they loved the monks. That very night, Enrique saddled up

Bellota and, with Olivela riding behind him, he came here. The youngest friars had already fled. The prior and the other four were getting ready to flee. The wedding was celebrated in articulo mortis, given the circumstances. Then they rode back to Olivela, and as Enrique was preparing to set out, after leaving her his castle, those seven anarchists . . ."

X The major listened, wide-eyed. "So not a living soul knows ~~it~~⁹ except her. They're all dead . . . What can we do in a case like this? You're a lawyer, Lluís. You know all the tricks: give me some advice. We have to really make people talk: show we're not a bunch of priest-killers like the Flatfoot Brigade. In my house in Barcelona, I've got a papal blessing in articulo mortis hanging above the bed . . ."

"We'll start by getting the witnesses to testify."

"Witnesses? Didn't you just say they were all dead and mummified?"

"There are still those guys who removed the mummies from their niches. They may know something about it. We'll make them talk."

Once we were back at headquarters, he put me in charge of the case. I questioned those six characters: six poor bastards ready to swear to anything as long as we didn't shoot them. They're always worried that we're about to shoot them. They shuffled in, one by one, with hangdog expressions. The dossier on the case was getting fatter. I don't even think they understood what was involved. They were so happy that we weren't going to shoot them that they didn't bother to inquire further.

X Restituto, who's not all there, showed up wrapped in a ~~double~~ mattress. His wife had tied it around his body. Only his head and feet stuck out. Everybody was looking out the windows. "What the devil are you doing, Restituto?" "Hell, this mattress'll stop any bullet."

It was very late when I got back to Olegaria's house. She can't go to

bed till I come home, though she no longer makes me supper. She was sitting by the fire. The nights are getting chilly. Poor midsummer heat; even its glory is uncertain . . . I sat down beside her as I used to do at breakfast before I joined the "Pipe Club." When I first got here, the poor woman brought me some truly bizarre breakfasts: tuna fish ~~soaked~~² in vinegar, herrings with hot peppers, and in the morning I can't handle anything heavier than toast and coffee with milk. As far as she's concerned, milk is something you only give ² sick people, and as for toast, "My God! What a waste of bread!" She'd cross herself, horrified to see me stick a fork through a slice and hold it above the fire. To toast something as sacred as bread . . . it was a sacrilege! I also had to make my own coffee. She didn't even know what it was, and one time ~~when~~² I gave her a taste she spat it out as though it were poison.

"Olegaria, what do you know about the lady in the castle?"

"She's not a lady, Don Lluís. Everyone in town knows what she is."

"They could be wrong."

"How can a whole town be wrong? She's from Castel, from Cagorcio's house--that's what they call her mother."

"I know that, Olegaria. Santiago told me, and even if she hadn't told me, I'd have guessed that Olivela and Cagorcio's daughter were one and the same. Some things are obvious at first glance; it's a question of putting two and two together. Poor Olivela . . ."

"What do you mean, poor? If you'd known the old lady who used to live there, may she rest in peace. Now she was a real lady! Whenever she came to Olivela we'd go out to meet her, as far as the cross that used to mark the village limits. She'd be riding in her cart, pulled by her mule. It's like I can still see it, dappled and glossy, stuffed with carob beans. It lived like a king! May she rest in peace, poor dear . . ."

"The lady or the mule?"

"She died without suspecting she had grandchildren by her maid--I mean the old lady. It seems like yesterday I heard them saying in the village, 'The old lady had a stroke; she's paralyzed.' She didn't last long after that, poor thing, always in her wheelchair. And while she was paralyzed, her son made her a grandmother and she didn't even know about it. The summer after she died, that whore showed up. She was already pregnant. We couldn't stop staring at her. Whenever the mothers got together, that was all we'd talk about."

"I bet."

"The boys got upset. They were ashamed, and early one morning they smeared the castle doors."

"What do you mean? Smeared them with what?"

"What do you think?"

What brutes!--and to think that Trini and Ramonet, in these people's eyes . . . God Almighty! What scum!

"The young master was furious when he saw what they'd done. He ordered the ones who'd smeared the doors to clean them. Since they worked on his lands, they had to obey him."

"Good for him! Those pigs . . ."

"Pigs? That's what she was, the whore! Around here we're still Christians, thank God."

"What about the kids, Olegaria? It's not their fault. They're innocent."

"Innocent? They're bastards!"

It was pointless to argue. Logic's not her forte. I tried another tack.

"Olegaria, you love your grandson."

"God Almighty! How could I not love him?"

"If your son-in-law had married your daughter under unusual circumstances, before dying, and the wedding had stayed secret, your grandson would be a bastard and his name would be Antonio Fernández instead of Antonio López Fernández."

She looked at me with her rheumy eyes, unable to understand. How could her grandson be a bastard? There are some things . . . it was too much for her imagination!

The fire slowly died, and in its light Olegaria, open-mouthed, looked like a witch. She stared at me in a state of shock, almost of consternation as I explained my version of the story. It's very late; now I can go to sleep. My version, now that Olegaria knows it, will sweep through the village like wildfire. The night breeze comes through my open shutters, bringing the sound of chirping crickets and the scent of passing summer.

August 21

Big news! The major received orders from the commander to have our battalion drawn up in formation tomorrow for review. Without fail!

Everyone's nervous, agitated, panicked! We spent the whole day drilling. The readiness of our recruits leaves much to be desired, and it's entirely our fault. We've wasted our time disgracefully between the "Pipe Club," the "Baby Bottle Club," and other such nonsense. Just today, despite the panic, Gallart and Rebull had a little tussle over Melitona, the redhead at the tavern. They uttered the most dreadful and uncouth curses. Picó had to pull them apart.

"What the hell do you guys see in her? What's all the fuss about?"

"Listen," Gallart replied, obese, red-faced, and sweaty, "don't you see how she moves her butt when she walks around the tavern? With that butt, she's got the whole brigade crazy about her!"

"Well, if that's how it is," Picó replied philosophically, "I give you permission to beat the stuffing out of each other."

Each company drilled separately; ours was assigned to some uncultivated fields outside town. But how could we teach the soldiers in one day what we should have spent weeks and weeks teaching them?

It's late, and I'm exhausted. Because of all the uproar, no one in our battalion's paid much attention to what the villagers consider the big news of the day. Olegaria told me, "To think how the other kids would throw rocks at them and the grownups all said, 'It serves them right, the bastards!' And now it turns out they weren't bastards at all, the poor darlings!"

August 22

A day of triumph. The head of the brigade praised Major Rosich: "I congratulate you, your captains, officers, non-coms, and troops. This is a battle-ready battalion our brigade can be proud of, while a certain neighboring brigade should be green with envy . . ."

The review took place on the grounds in front of the monastery, the only place in the whole district where an entire battalion could maneuver. Our major decided to seize the occasion to return the mummies to their tombs. When would he have another as solemn as this, with the whole battalion in formation, its commander, and his staff? Everyone in Olivell had turned out and occupied the low hills around us. There were so many people on Calvary that it looked like an anthill. The mayor, in his best suit, cut quite a dash with his black silk sash and matching kerchief around his head, new rope-soled sandals tied with ribbons, and a tasseled staff. There wasn't a cloud in the sky.

The commander of our brigade is a tall, heavyset lieutenant colonel

some sixty years old, very friendly and courteous, who has one peculiarity: he lost his hair when he was young as a result of some illness (the entire brigade agrees on the diagnosis), and he wears a wig and uses eyebrow pencil. This makes him look like a Japanese doll: a giant one, of course. Would you believe that this chronic disease lends him a kind of aura in the eyes of the entire brigade: officers, noncoms, and privates? "A real man! Tough as nails!" His shiny car stood by the monastery door; beside it, our major's Ford looked like a poor ^{relative.} ~~relation.~~ For the two cars to get there, the entire battalion had to work on the path with picks and shovels, widening it enough for a wagon to pass.

Those grounds swarmed with life beneath the brilliant sun, while inside everything was still . . . The battalion drilled to the sound of drums and bugles. I watched my men. "Who the devil could have taught them all that?" I wondered.

A bugle call rang out. The soldiers snapped to attention. Silence fell on the crowd of civilians who were watching. The six village idiots who'd helped the anarchist committee sat behind the mayor and were also dressed in their Sunday best. They gaped at that Japanese doll covered with medals and decorations like a bunch of fish who can't figure out how they got out of the water. The Japanese doll yawned, dabbing his lips with his handkerchief, elegantly indifferent. The moment had arrived: the moment to return mystery unto mystery, to again veil the macabre as though it were obscene.

Watched by the battalion and the villagers ("coram exercitu populoque," in the Orator's words--apparently he's another ex-seminarian), those six fish put the mummies back in their niches. Our band played "The Death of Ase." Those who were in the know glanced at Picó out of the corners of their eyes. He played away as though it were no big deal. He's

X not the kind to gloat over his ^{victories} ~~achievements~~.

X The Japanese doll kept yawning while the six fish sealed the tombs under the direction of a bricklayer. But this walling-up lasted too long, and people started getting restless. Finally, the last brick was in place and the crowd began to disperse, but just at that moment Rebull, as our political commissar, felt obliged to make a speech: "From this moment on, the spirit--I mean the spirit of learning--will ^{hover} ~~float~~ above these cadavers, for learning and hygiene are inseparable in a liberal, social, and federal--though not clerical--democracy. No, friends, brothers, and comrades: make no mistake. Though we are not clerical, we are liberal, radical, and federal . . . we are pillars of social progress . . ."

No one listened to him. The villagers don't understand much Catalan, and we're sick of such litanies. As our major said one day, "If only those commissars would stop pestering us and let us fight this war in peace . . ."

The brigade will keep a picket posted at the monastery gate until it can be restored to its owners, the Mercedarians. The lieutenant colonel told the major, in a stage whisper loud enough for all the officers to hear, "The flatfeet could never have thought up something as good as this; they know nothing of hygiene or culture . . ." We all laughed, feeling flattered because he'd winked at us and embraced our major before getting in his car. As it drove off, all the troops and villagers applauded as one. We all agreed that our lieutenant colonel was a swell guy. "Of course; he's from Manlleu!" Gallart announced, saying he had gleaned this information from reliable sources.

Back in the privacy of our club, as we ate supper, Picó cleared up the funeral-march mystery. "This battalion's like a married couple. He's in charge, but I wear the pants."

August 23

We've been successful beyond my wildest dreams. The mayor and the justice of the peace swear they already knew, that they'd heard Enrique himself say so. The major's taken the matter to heart and keeps hunting up new witnesses. First the mayor and the justice of the peace swelled the dossier, followed by the councilors and bailiff. The only holdout was the town clerk. Apparently he's a radical, strongly opposed to church weddings and even more ~~so~~ if they're in articulo mortis, but the major had a private chat with him and when they emerged, he signed along with all the others.

I was very eager to get this unanimous statement from all the village's leading lights, including the clerk and bailiff, because given the current state of affairs, a purely religious wedding might not be accepted as legal. Nothing's been left to chance; all the loose ends have been tied up; we now have a civil and a religious marriage.

My biggest surprise came from Olegaria: she also insists that she knew all about it! I mean, that she already knew before. My head spinning, I asked her how she'd known. "Because everyone here knew!" was her reply. They'll end up persuading me. Don't they say vox populi: vox Dei?

I went up to the castle. She received me in that little sitting-and-dining room, and as soon as I'd entered I noticed that one small detail had changed: beneath the rococo mirror, there was a small photo. A man, somewhere between forty-five and fifty years old; an ordinary face, chubby, with beady eyes, somewhere between stupid and roguish, beneath thick eyebrows. I'd have taken him for the owner of a prosperous grocery store.

"My husband, may he rest in peace."

There was nothing forced in her voice as she uttered the word "husband." She was wearing a black silk bodice I'd never seen before, and a gold medallion with enameling and diamonds around her neck.

"He gave it to me for my Saint's Day. I didn't dare to wear it; they're real diamonds."

Her eyes shone with gratitude. The door to the children's bedroom was open; I'd never seen it before. It's very cheerful, painted glossy white, with unpainted beams of reddish wood--perhaps they're savin. Along the wall there's a trunk or hope chest made of unfinished pine, smooth, without panels or moldings. That's what they're like in these parts, where chests are still a common piece of furniture. A rush-bottomed chair stood on each side of the chest. There were two small iron bedsteads, painted bright red, in a little alcove separated from the rest of the room by an arched doorway. The bedspreads are made of cretonne with thick red and white stripes--the same material as the curtain hanging in the archway. Between the two little beds, there's a washbasin identical to the one in my room at Olegaria's house. A scent something like lavender, like perfumed soap made with green almonds, like linen sheets stored with quince or apples, wafted from that open door. Everything was extremely simple, bright, and cheerful.

"I'm very grateful. Thanks to you, they'll have a name and a place in society. You've done a good deed."

I stared at those two little beds and thought, "It hadn't occurred to me that I was doing it for them."

"I'm delighted that I could help. From now on we can call you 'your ladyship.'"

"It doesn't matter to me. I was concerned about their future."

"I didn't do it for them. I'd be a hypocrite if I said I had. As you know . . ."

"I'm very grateful to you," she cut me off. Her voice was a murmur. She hung her head, looking up at me out of those eyes, darker and more brilliant than ever. What did she want that look to convey? I drank it in silently, not daring to venture into the no man's land that lay between us. Yes, we were like two enemies separated by a few feet of no man's land. The silence grew tense. Suddenly she raised her head and looked out the window, wide-open as usual. The swallows flew back and forth, as they always do. Their ^{curves} ~~swings~~ didn't reach our no man's land; they belonged to the world outside.

"I'd like to ask you something, Don Lluís."

This unexpected "Don" hurt me. "I don't call you Donya Olivela!"

"Nor should you. It wouldn't suit me. You have to be born with a 'Don' before your name. Yours is written on your face: you're a gentleman. No; don't try to deny it. Anyone can see it. You couldn't get rid of it even if you tried. I know that from experience. I wanted to ask if there's anything else I have to do to settle my sons' inheritance."

"You should have all this notarized and take it to the nearest court of first instance, since he died intestate. The nearest court is about 125 miles from the front. As far as notaries are concerned, God knows where the nearest one is."

Silence fell again. I looked at her; she gazed off into the distance, as though she were fretting about something she couldn't quite define. She breathed deeply, and with every breath her breast heaved as if absorbing all the air in Olivela, that air so laden with memories for her. The breeze brought the aroma of hot bread from the three communal ovens, mixed with others like hay, cool cellars, sheep, and basil (every window in Olivela

X has a pot of basil to keep away ~~the~~ mosquitos). Each smell must have roused a flutter of emotions like those flocks of autumn birds that take flight as one approaches, getting ready to migrate. I remained silent. I was waiting for some magic word that would fling open that sealed inner world, so forbidden and dizzying, but she said nothing, refusing to grant me that magic word.

"Olivela . . . you promised to read my letter if I found that register."

Emerging from her daydream like someone waking with a start, she stared at me in surprise.

"Yes . . . don't think I've forgotten. I read your letter, and of course I'm grateful for your kindness."

That "of course" was like a scalpel cutting into my heart.

"You're very kind," she continued, looking out the window again. "I don't know how to thank you for everything you've done. I'd be very upset if you thought me ungrateful."

"You don't have to thank me for anything. I'm not kind. What I . . ."

Y "I'd like a couple of days to think it over. I'm sure you'll understand that, with all this turmoil, I haven't been able to think about anything but my children. Put yourself in my place. When Santiaga brought me the news, I fainted. I'd never fainted in my entire life, and I'm sure I'll never faint again. You can't imagine how waiting for something like this can wear on your nerves, when you've staked everything on it! No; you can't imagine it. In your letter you shared some intimate details, details that-- how ^{shall} ~~can~~ I put it?--I'd never tell anyone. I hope you won't mind my telling you I didn't care for those confessions. What does all that have to do with me? Believe me: you should keep such things to yourself."

"I'd like to tell you everything, even my most shameful secrets. I want you to understand how much you mean . . ."

"Don't go on," her steely gaze was more imperious than her words.

"Stop ranting and listen to me. Since you revealed such intimate details, I'll tell you a few too. Perhaps then you'll understand me a little better. No; don't get your hopes up. You know nothing about me! You think I'm someone else. I've had this impression since the first day we met. I was born in Castel de Olivo. My father's a landless peasant, one of the poorest in the area. It's been years, many years since I've seen him. And I don't want to. Anyhow, he's not around; he's in enemy territory."

"I know all about it. They told me in Castel when I had no idea that one day I'd meet you, that one day you'd . . ."

"You know they call my father Cagorcio?"

"I'm aware of that. I know all about it."

"It's a ridiculous story, isn't it? Tragedies are always ridiculous. It's not poverty; why should I mind if my father is poor? Nor am I ashamed of his nickname, though there must be some reason for it, don't you think? I've never tried to hide my background. No; it's something else. Brutishness, lack of sensitivity . . . It's easy to say we all have to accept our fathers, especially easy if your name is something like Don Lluís de Brocà i de Rusalleda."

"I'm afraid you're mistaken about that. I'm not 'de Rusalleda'; quite the contrary: 'Son of Rusalleda. Soup Noodles.' If I told you . . . it'd take too long to explain. You're imagining things about my family. I'm an orphan. I never knew my father or mother. And with my uncle, I had to suffer everything you've said: brutishness, lack of sensitivity . . ."

"Say what you like; it's not the same. I've never met your uncle, but I'm sure he's clean and doesn't drink or curse. Though sometimes I wonder if it's possible to get drunk without drinking, since my father doesn't drink, I can assure you. He can't use that excuse. He was cold, stone

sober. Anyway, never mind. Tragedies are ridiculous; that's why respectable people avoid them. You're a lawyer, a second lieutenant, and perhaps other things that don't figure in this dossier. Your wife is also well educated. I'm sure she knows how to play the piano. The piano! Would you believe I sometimes dream I'm playing it? Naturally, I can't read music. I learned to read and write when I was working for Enrique's mother. It's going to be hard getting used to calling her my mother. The good woman died without the slightest idea she might end up being my . . . She'd been very good to me. She taught me to sew, embroider, read and write, cook, and even talk properly. Because I spoke the usual mixture of Catalan and Castilian that you hear in these villages . . ."

She became more animated, and her eyes sparkled in a way I'd never seen before. The memories seemed to fan the coals beneath the ashes, making them glow.

"His mother played the piano very well: strange music, different from anything I'd heard before. I liked to listen to her. I was in my little room, darning or ironing, while she played in the parlor. Once she'd told me the names of the pieces she was playing: very odd names . . . I felt like they were from another world. How I'd love to hear them again! That would make me so happy! But around here . . . Would you believe I once asked her to teach me? She didn't scold me; she was very kind. 'Olivela, what good would it do you to study music? That's not for you. Learn what'll come in handy and forget about the rest.' She was right. Why should a maid learn to play the piano? And she had no inkling that I'd ever be anything else. Poor Donya Gaietana, she was such a lovely person! If she'd suspected, she would have died of shame. She was getting old, but there was no malice in her. One year she gave me a week off so I could visit Castel de Olivo for the village festival. I was fifteen years old. I hadn't

seen my parents in two years. I was so excited! I loved my parents. Don't you believe me?"

"Everyone loves his parents until the contrary is proven. For example, I'm crazy about mine, which doesn't stop me thinking sometimes, 'Would I be so crazy about them if I'd known them?'"

X "Do you know ^a what it's like to arrive all excited at the house where you were born and find . . .? Bah, tragedy is ridiculous. I don't want to make you feel sorry for me. People have lied about me, said terrible things. They even smeared the doors when I arrived here pregnant."

"I know."

"Well, would you believe I prefer to have them hate me? Pity revolts me. It's a cowardly way people have invented to show contempt and still feel virtuous. I'd rather have them spit in my face, smear my doors with . . ."

I was surprised to see her so impassioned--she, who always seemed so cool and collected.

X "You're very young. When you're my age, you'll realize that loneliness is our daily bread, and there's nothing we can do about it." Her magnificent contralto, swept along by her vehemence, took on its deepest tremolo. "And you have to face up to it, take it for what it is. Listen to me. Please don't interrupt. I know you won't understand, but I don't care. Why should you understand me? I get the impression that you've used me in your fantasies, and that's something women don't like. We don't like being taken for angels; it's an awkward disguise."

"I don't exactly take you for an angel."

"A vamp, maybe? Even worse. You'll be even more disappointed."

"Neither an angel nor a vamp."

"A maid?" her eyes were terribly mocking.

"Who by taking great risks, managed to become mistress of Olivela and its castle."

She looked away. The silence grew heavy as the seconds passed. I'd hit the mark. Having found her sore spot gave me intense pleasure. Perhaps cruelty is passion's ultimate mystery. What pleasure could compare to making our idols suffer to avenge the adoration they inspire in us!

Gazing into the distance, she spoke slowly, as though talking to herself. "How could I pull myself out of that pit? I went back to Barcelona. Where else could I go? The lady was understanding, provided I respected the distance between us. She took me in, comforted me. Enrique was twenty years older than I was, which seemed like a huge difference. At first I didn't understand what he was insinuating, the words he whispered in my ear when we passed in the hallway. In fact, he seemed even older than he was because he was so fat and his premature baldness made him look very respectable. Furthermore, he was shy, poor fellow. When the lady spoke about my situation, she always said the same thing: 'Olivela, if your parents don't want you, you've got a home here. We're a Christian family, thank God, an old-fashioned family.' Poor dear! She was even more innocent than I was. She gave me Sunday afternoons off, on the condition that I spent them at a convent on Consell de Cent Street. I can see it now: the maids' convent. Actually, the nuns were very kind to me. They'd have loved to have me as a novice. I could have become a nun and lived in that convent, which was cozy, friendly, clean, and spacious. The mother superior adored me. I couldn't decide what to do. If the young master--I mean Enrique--had been young and handsome, I'd have become a nun."

"I'm not sure I heard you right. Don't you mean the opposite?"

"The opposite? Why the opposite?" she looked at me, surprised at my

X question. "If Enrique had been young and handsome, i couldn't have hoped for more than a passing fling, the kind he wouldn't have even bothered to tell his friends about. Fortunately, he was fat and bald, quite a bit shorter than me, and, above all, he was old enough to be my father. That's a big difference!"

"What kind of difference?"

She looked at me as though she'd suddenly realized that she wasn't alone, that I was listening to her. She paused.

"I want you to know the truth. I don't want you to think I hated my father because he was poor." She was getting worked up again. "I've never told anyone about this; you'll be the first and the last person. It would pain me too much if you, especially you . . . I never cared what anybody else thought about me, but you're not like the others. What you said hurt me. Get it out of your head; I'm not a wicked woman." She was so upset that she seemed about to burst into tears. "I've had such an unhappy life, believe me!"

"I do believe you."

Another silence. She made a visible effort to calm herself. I was thinking, "What if she really isn't a wicked woman? What exactly is a wicked woman? A woman who makes you lose your head. But is that her fault?"

"Of course you've heard the story about the washtub: a ridiculous story. And you believed it, just like everyone else. Like Donya Gaietana, like Enrique himself! It's so easy to believe a story when it's truly ridiculous, truly idiotic! My father didn't throw me out; I left. I didn't even wait to dry myself, because it's true that I was taking a bath in that washtub. I threw on my clothes and ran for my life! The main thing was to get away! My father--I hate to say this--always had a brutish

expression, but usually it was--how shall I put it--the expression of a domesticated brute. I'd never seen the expression he had at that moment. I never want to see another face like that one again. I'd rather die! I screamed and, as I ran, I knocked the tub over."

There was another silence, heavier this time. I looked down at the floor.

"If you knew how sometimes that stench of garlic comes back to me."

A transition; her contralto regained its normal timbre.

"Enrique, on the other hand, didn't scare me; quite the opposite. You could see he was so helpless . . . A bit repulsive, perhaps, because he was sick. He'd been something of a playboy in his youth. He could offer me security, peace and quiet. Put yourself in my place. Naturally, I sized up my situation carefully. I thought if I could get the upper hand (which would be easy), one day after his mother died, I'd be able to talk him into marrying me. I was mistaken. 'Are you crazy? How can you expect me to marry Cagorcio's daughter?' 'In Barcelona,' I insisted, 'no one knows about it.' 'Sooner or later they'll find out.' And I couldn't get him to budge. I had to play rough, especially since I was over thirty. I couldn't waste any more years. I'd already wasted too many!"

Once again, she seemed to be talking to herself, as though she'd forgotten I was there.

"I used all my cunning to get around his precautions. How ridiculous they were, my God! How pathetic it all was! And to think that on account of that, so many men talk like fools and even act like fools sometimes . . . Though in truth, they don't usually act like fools; they usually look before they leap. Once I was sure I was pregnant, I begged him by everything he held sacred to give his child a name. I was sure I'd win. Once again, I was mistaken. 'You want to make me the laughing-stock of

Barcelona! Married to my maid!"

I glanced at that face of a prosperous grocer, without debts or debtors, calm and shrewd. "In God we trust; all others pay cash." This was Don Enrique de Alfoz y Penyarrostra, lord of Olivet and member of the Aragonese nobility--as he was identified in the documents I'd had to pore over.

"He must have caused you a lot of suffering."

"Suffering?" And again she looked at me in surprise. He contralto grew faint. Her tremolo dissipated, as in the distance or in the twilight, like her "Good evening" at that crossroad. "Please: don't ask ~~me~~ about my feelings toward him. Do men often have the urge to pry into such secrets? If you knew how I hate being asked questions . . . Be satisfied with what I've told you, which is more than enough. You know all about my biggest secret: the secret between you and me, our secret--the one my sons will never learn!"

Her look was one of complicity, crafty and slightly mischievous.

"Olivela . . ." I approached her and saw those four gray hairs, those tenuous strands of spiderweb. "I'd like there to be not one secret between us but every possible secret: all the secrets of life and death . . ."

That mischievous gleam had disappeared, replaced by a look so different, keener than any I'd seen before, as though it were penetrating to the very marrow of my soul. I drew closer. I could hear her breathing, but that look had vanished and her usual expression had returned.

"No . . ." her far-off voice said. "That would be too beautiful. Some things would be so wonderful if they weren't so dreadful . . ."

"We could be so tremendously happy just by letting ourselves go . . . A moment like this can change one's entire life!"--I didn't know what I was saying. "Stop wasting your time on second thoughts that ruin the only

thing that matters! We're bound to each other; we're doomed to be together! Nothing matters except this moment of madness!"

X "Please"--and she really seemed terrified, pleading for mercy--"calm yourself. Can't you see you've being unfair? Don't you understand what a ~~desperate~~ ^{terrible} temptation . . .? No one's ever loved me, and now you come and say things no one ever said before; now, when I'm old and stuck in this corner forever . . . now, when I have no hopes!"

"We've found each other--blessed be this war"--I didn't know what I was doing but she stopped me. With another brusque transition, she said in a casual tone, "Come back the day after tomorrow and we'll talk about it." She held out her hands to me as though we'd been discussing indifferent matters, the weather or business. Only a certain gleam in the depths of her grateful, liquid eyes lent more meaning to her gesture and words.

She was born to be a great lady. She knows how to impose her authority without your noticing, comme allant de soi. It's in her blood. That was Santiago's hypothesis . . . certainly, after that stupid incident with the washtub, it'd be infinitely better if what Santiago suspects were true.

August 24

Insistent rumors are going around of some major operation. The battalion will leave Olivet, probably forever. From my room, I can hear Captain Gallart's deep voice singing softly in the main square. The Orator's accompanying him on that cracked guitar. His song is languid, monotonous, enervating; vile and sentimental as a thick, sweet liqueur--and the South American accent Gallart deems appropriate makes it even more so:

Hal { I loved a girl from Olivet

ital {

but she didn't love me.

He's referring to Melitona, of course.

August 25

We received our marching orders first thing this morning. We don't know where they're sending us; we'll find out when we get there.

I went up to the castle. She was sitting on a low chair by the window, sewing.

"We're leaving the day after tomorrow."

"Poor fellows, off again to Lord knows where . . ." She smiled and held out a letter. "It's the letter you wrote me. I'm returning it so you can burn it. I know that after a while it'd worry you to think I still had it."

I didn't understand what she was saying. A letter? A letter I wrote her? What letter? Suddenly I remembered and understood what she was driving at.

I understood everything she meant to imply by giving me back that letter.

"But . . . you know what it means that we're leaving? You know we may never see each other again?"

"I wish you good luck."

"Never again . . . do you know what 'never again' means?"

"Please, be quiet."

"For you, I . . ."

"Be quiet or speak more softly. The children are here; they're still sleeping."

"They could put me in jail . . . and I have a son! Or don't you realize the seriousness of what you talked me into doing?"

"I'm quite aware of it. Calm down. I'm extremely grateful to you and will be all my life."

"I don't want your gratitude!"

X
My hands were shaking. I must have looked like a real fool. If at least, like the other day, I'd been able to open a wound and shatter that infuriating composure . . . At my feet, I saw that ridiculous abyss opening--the one that separates a man ^{swept} ~~carried~~ away by passion from a woman cold as ice. I saw the abyss and leapt. I found myself kneeling beside her.

A
"Calm yourself. You're very agitated. You don't know what you're doing. If the children came in right now . . ."

Like an ~~idiot~~, I covered her hands with kisses.

"I know exactly what I'm doing. We're free. You're widowed . . ."

"But you're not."

"I'm not married. I explained that in the letter."

"You're raving. You don't know what you're saying. You'll regret it later, when you get over it. You think you'd really leave your wife . . . to marry me?"

Her sewing cushion was between her knees. Her laughter shocked me. Where did she get that laugh from? I felt like the most wretched imbecile on earth.

"You love your wife, no matter what you say. All men love their wives, however much they try to fool themselves. Even Enrique loved me after his fashion. He was terribly bored in my company, but he couldn't live without me."

"Don't compare me with him. We have nothing in common."

"Are you sure? Well, then why don't you marry Trini? Why don't you protect your son? Men are all alike! It's among women that you find a

tremendous variety."

"And what variety are you? The kind who plots her every move, without the slightest trace of feeling!"

"Now stand up. Can't you see the children could wake up at any moment? If you could see yourself in a mirror, you'd be appalled. You're making a fool of yourself!"

"And why shouldn't we make fools of ourselves once in a while?"

"If you don't stand up, I will. I don't like to see a well-bred young man acting like a fool."

It's easy falling to your knees if you've lost your head over a woman. The hard part is getting up again.

"Now sit down and listen to me." I obeyed her like a puppet. "Think of my situation, put yourself in my place. How can you ask me to ruin everything it was so hard for me to achieve? What I need now is for people to stop talking about me, to forget me, to leave me alone in my burrow. You've done me an enormous favor. Don't destroy everything you've built just to satisfy a passing whim. Can't you understand? Don't you remember how I once pointed out that I could be your mother? If you were a sixty-year-old widower with six or seven children from your first marriage, I'd think you were serious. Leave your wife for me? Admit that such lunacy never crossed your mind until now, and if you think of it later you'll be ashamed of what you've said!"

"You're made of ice. Right from the start you understood the effect you had on me and how you could turn it to your advantage! You're incapable of loving!"

"I love my children. Who do you expect me to love? Every officer in the Catalan army who passes through Olivet?"

"Who cares about the Catalan army? Is that all I am in your eyes:

another officer passing through, one among many?"

"No. You're not one among many; you're not just another officer."

And her eyes again filled with gratitude, sparkling with tremulous tears that never quite crystallized. "Ever since I first found out . . . Lluís. But it's so hard for you to understand! Believe me: after my children, I've never loved anyone as much as you."

"That's a lie."

"Believe me . . . Lluís. Why won't you believe me. Why don't you trust me a little? Why is it so hard for you to understand me? Such an intelligent, well-bred young man . . . It's so simple! I'm happy in this castle, though it may seem incredible to you."

"You're . . ."

"Shut up and listen! I'm happy! All you could do is ruin my life. And it's been ruined so much already. Why should I go back to that? I don't like being unhappy. I'm telling you this because some people seem to enjoy it. I always see the ridiculous side of unhappiness. And so do you, don't kid yourself. You don't care for tragedies either, and you're afraid of being ludicrous. Yes: you."

"How can you say you're happy?"

"Why shouldn't I be? I love this castle. You say I'm incapable of loving, but let me tell you: I love this castle with all my heart! This smell of a big country house"--she had recovered her habitual composure--"this smell of comfort, of wardrobes full of linen sheets"--she looked out the window again and seemed to be thinking aloud--"this smell of a well-to-do household, of big, high-ceilinged rooms, of fine wood and linen . . . Of course you don't know the stench of enclosure and rot. At most you've smelled it for a few hours or days, not your whole life! There's nothing as wonderful as the smell of a big old walnut closet all full of clean, dry,

starched, pressed, and carefully folded linen . . . the smell of lavender and fresh-baked bread . . . The winters here are so long . . . The northwind never stops howling, water freezes in the washbasins. If you don't have a wine cellar, a pantry, a granary, a mountain of firewood near the entrance, and big wardrobes full of underclothes . . . Because we're not like people in Barcelona; here we don't wash clothes once or twice a week. Since we do our laundry in the river, we can't wash anything in the winter. We wash clothes a couple of times a year, at the beginning of spring and at the beginning of fall. We load them in a wagon and take them to the river, where women from the village do our laundry. For a week or two that's all they do. So you can imagine how much underwear a respectable household needs! Because we have to change every two or three days. The dirty linen piles up in the attic till the big washday comes. Here we still make bleach the old-fashioned way, with ashes from our fireplaces. You can't imagine any of this . . . that howling northwind. Believe me; those howls would freeze your soul. [^]

"But in Barcelona . . ."

"I'd feel as buried in an apartment in Barcelona as I felt in my father's house. How slowly time passed in Barcelona from the moment Donya Gaietana told me to pack her suitcases. I was dying to get back to the castle. This castle . . . more, much more than if I'd been born here; I love it as though I'd died here! I'd feel so lonely if I didn't have it to keep me company . . . There are feelings too strange to tell, because there's no word to ^{express} describe them. The big rooms in this castle, all its fields and ^{estates} ~~properties~~ . . . There's nothing I like as much as walking around them, especially at sunset. Often I take the children. That evening we first met that you've reminded me of so many times, we'd walked to the end of Deep Valley. Would you believe it takes an hour to walk to the

end of it and back? And it's only one of our estates. Often I take the kids, but I can assure you that I like going alone even better, like before . . . like long before . . . You'd have to hear the northwind howling from the beginning of December till the beginning of April to understand all the strange feelings I have. Some feelings are so strange . . . as though I were remembering things that happened long before I was born . . ."

"What a great actress she would have been!" I thought. "What a great actress! From the moment I met her she's been playing a role, but so realistically! So realistically that she doesn't even realize she's acting! And her voice helps so much! What a contralto! The whole Liceu would give her a standing ovation!"

"It's such a pleasure to be able to tell someone about all these strange feelings," she continued. "For this alone, because you're the first person I've been able to share them with, I'd be full of gratitude and love. You don't really think I take you for just another officer. Being able to tell you this, to get out all these things that are so hard to say . . . There are spots near Olivet that make me feel as though I'd spent happy times there, all alone. But when? I was eight years old the first time I saw Olivet. We girls in Castel hired ourselves out to harvest grapes, olives, and saffron. When we'd finished our day's work, I'd go off by myself and wander around the castle's properties. At that time of day, when night begins to fall, a smell rises from the earth like ~~that~~ ^{the} music Donya Gaietana played, a smell of Heaven. And this evening smell: I'd known it for a long, long time. From when? My God, from when? To remember . . . to remember what? What does it mean to remember? Memories of my own life don't mean anything to me: the life of a farmworker, a maid, someone's mistress, whose doors they once smeared . . . But these other memories, this other past . . . How could I ever leave this castle? They told me so

many stories about it, they said it was so old . . . When I used to come from Castel with the other girls and first caught sight of it in the distance--I was always the first to see it, outlined against the sky on the horizon--how it attracted me! If you could only understand . . . I could have loved someone, whatever you may think. Talking to you like I'm talking now, I realize how much I could have loved, how passionately. Believe me, Lluís. I could have loved Enrique, but he hated this castle, he hated this countryside. He couldn't stand it. When we were here, all he thought about was Barcelona. After Donya Gaietana's death, he even talked about selling it. 'The properties don't bring in any income. I could reinvest the capital in something productive.' Enrique wasn't a man to run a business. In Barcelona he killed time. Sometimes he'd stroll around the port and see what ships had arrived, or he'd go to the exchange and watch the traders buying and selling wheat and barley, or he'd stand in the Plaça Reial listening to the speakers. He spent hours and hours in the Liceu Café. There he met a man from Reus who knew about sock manufacturing and needed a partner with capital. If he didn't end up selling everything to start a sock factory in Barcelona, it was because his ~~mind~~ ^{attention} wandered. Poor thing, he had so little stamina . . . And besides, he was so shy . . . Imagine: in Olivet he spent all his time in the wine cellar, sitting in the dark, not doing a thing. He hated the castle and its lands. And I could have loved him, believe me, I'd have loved him if he'd felt like the heir to these lands, master of this castle, lord of this village. I would have even understood why he didn't want to marry me. Lord of Olivet . . . But he made fun of all that. 'In Barcelona, no one even knows where this place is; you can't even put it on your card. If I tried to explain it, I'd sound ridiculous. Whereas a manufacturer . . .' He said all that stuff about lords and castles was just history, but then why wouldn't

X he marry me? What was stopping him? He didn't do all the things every other lord had done ~~up until him~~ ^{hung around}. The paupers who ~~lived in~~ the castle--as soon as Donya Gaietana was buried he sent them to the poorhouse in Saragossa. Of course, you don't know what I'm talking about. Before, the paupers in Olivet didn't have to go to the poorhouse because they could eat at the castle. The paupers' kitchen is still here--that's where they ate lunch and supper. The fire hasn't been lit since Donya Gaietana died. He even took away the "Village Barrel": a big wine barrel that stood at the entrance, ~~under~~ the arch leading to the stairs, always full of wine so that anyone who wanted could stop and drink there, because back in the old days they never locked the castle doors. In the village, of course, they blame all these changes on me. Actually, in a village like Olivet, where everyone has a house and a plot of land, hardly anyone's poor! An occasional cripple, a childless widow . . . It hardly cost anything to feed them! Why send them to a poorhouse, far from their village, far from everything that had been their lives? 'That's all ancient history,' he'd say, but if it was all ancient history, what was stopping him from marrying me?"

For the first time, I saw hatred in her eyes. And every other feeling paled beside that hatred, like other colors beside bright scarlet.

"The castle . . . I could tell you so many strange stories! With Enrique, on the other hand, it was as though he remembered nothing. One evening Enrique Junior, who must have been four or five, came down from the attic with a little owl. 'Put it back in its nest,' I told him. 'If you put it back, you'll find a coin there.' Nobody had told me anything about coins; I didn't even know where the nest was. A gold doubloon; the first one I'd ever seen. I could tell you so many strange stories . . . There was a head with a wig. One night . . . but why should I tell you that? What

difference would it make to you? I love this castle. I feel so happy when I think my sons were born and have been raised here! It makes up for everything I've had to suffer! I wish I knew how old these doubloons with the wigs are. From our grandparents' time? Or even earlier? Our grandparents' grandparents? It's all so long ago, my God, so many years ago! I get lost trying to imagine it. And it keeps me company. It keeps me company to think their grandparents' grandparents already lived here, and that their grandchildren's grandchildren will still live here. One person is so insignificant! Children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren . . . that counts a lot more. I don't want death to end it all! Good God, I don't want that to happen, and anyway, one person doesn't count for anything! Children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren . . . all born and raised here. For them, this whole castle will be full of memories! Every night, after putting them to bed, I walk through the house. It's not that I'm scared of burglars. There aren't any around here. I do it because I enjoy it. Everything keeps me company: the mare stamping in the stable, the pig grunting, a mouse scurrying around in the attic, even a termite gnawing away at a beam. I like seeing geckos on the walls, just as I like to think there's an owl's nest in the attic. I'd like the gables to be full of swallows' and swifts' nests . . . All those lives make me feel less alone! A manor house is like a stone frigate where we've all embarked together, people and animals. We're all together in this big frigate that seems motionless but is sailing through the sea of time. If you knew how unhappy I felt in that apartment in Barcelona: so cramped, so dead, so empty, without swallows' and owls' nests, without a cellar or an attic. Once a Barcelonan asked me if I wasn't scared of ghosts at night in such a big, solitary house. Ghosts? Believe me: if I ran into one on my nightly rounds, I'd feel like I'd found a brother! When I came to live here after

Donya Gaietana's death, I found a cradle in the attic. It was shaped like a coffin except for the high headboard. Cradles like that are still common around here, in poor households. They're made of pine, and the headboards are no higher than the sides. The one I found was made of very fine wood, well polished. It smelled so pleasant! And the headboard was carved with the family's coat of arms: an olive tree with a cross above it.

Enrique told me it had been his grandfather's cradle. I brought it down so Enrique Junior could sleep in it and I stored the modern crib with brass bars in the attic. I liked the cradle because long ago the sons of this house had slept in it and because it was like the ones poor people have except that the wood gave off a nice smell and it had the family's coat of arms. I also liked it because it was shaped like a coffin . . . to be born and die in this castle, to sink deep roots into this land, like an olive tree! I want Enrique Junior to feel tied to this place, to never even dream of selling this castle. I'd rather die than see him marry a commoner. I want him to marry someone like him, from a house with a coat of arms above the door. There's another one around here, the baroness's house. She has a daughter his age. Right now they're far away, abroad. The baroness is a widow. The family's fallen on hard times. They had to mortgage many of their properties, but what a good family! As old as ours . . . If they hadn't mortgaged almost everything, perhaps it wouldn't occur to me. The last thing I'd want is to see Enrique Junior marry any old girl. He's the heir to his family name, to this castle, to its estates . . ."

"This castle and its estates: that's what you wanted. That and nothing else. You . . ."

"If I were what you think I am, I wouldn't wish you luck."

"What do you mean?"

"You know my secret. The day after tomorrow you'll all leave. Many

of you won't come back, to Olivel or anywhere else. One of them could be you. If that happened, I could feel like a weight had been lifted off me. I can assure you it's quite the opposite. I can swear before God that I wish you luck. Now listen to me: love your wife, marry her as soon as you can. Don't you understand what a treacherous position an unmarried mother is in? And you still insist that you have nothing in common with Enrique!"

"Don't go on like this. The two cases have nothing to do with each other. Trini and I decided not to marry because of our ideas."

"Say what you like: everything's a matter of ideas, if you want to look at it that way. The result is the same, believe me. I'm fond of you, and I wouldn't want to be the cause of your doing something foolish. I'd feel guilty the rest of my life! Marry Trini and forget about this useless nonsense."

"Useless!" The coldness of this word hurt me more than anything else. And she was sitting there in front of me with her sewing cushion between her knees, as indifferent, splendid, and monstrous as life itself. I remembered something I'd seen a while ago outside town, in a field covered with stubble. I was lying beneath an olive tree, trying to take a nap until the midday heat had passed. A praying mantis was making its way among the amputated wheatstalks. It was the big kind you see once the hottest part of summer has passed, a very elegant grayish-green, long as a finger. Its head, gracious as a stylized heart, swayed above a short, slender thorax that contrasted with the opulence of its abdomen. It crept along for a short while and then stopped and looked back, as though something had caught its eye: another praying mantis, smaller, that approached it as if in dread. I understood what was happening; the first one was a female, the second a male. I remembered reading something about it years ago. The male spread his wings with a kind of shudder and

mounted her, clasping her between his legs. I observed it all with the mixture of curiosity and disgust we usually feel about the mystery of life renewed. It went on and on. More than an hour passed, and that pygmy was still on top of the giant. A barely perceptible shudder ran through him. He seemed enraptured, ecstatic. I'd lit my pipe and kept an eye on my watch so I could time the ceremony, and I thought of Soleràs's ravings . . . "Love is sublime for those who make it and obscene for those who watch." The minutes passed, the shudders continued. Tired of watching, I took a stroll. A couple of hours later, I returned to my observatory. The couple was still there. The rapturous male was still on top of her, but his head was gone. She, with her graceful head turned around, was slowly devouring him, and it was impossible to tell if those last shudders were of pleasure, terror, or both things at once.

Suddenly, she focused her eyes on mine, with that shimmering, liquid light, that underwater moonbeam that transfigures them sometimes.

"You're wrong if you think I'm monstrously cold and ungrateful," she said, as though she'd been reading my mind. "You don't realize that if I judged you as you do me, superficially and without trying to understand you, I wouldn't think much of you. I mean, if you'd done all this not for my children--or even for me, but generously--but only in order to get me to . . . How vile that would be, my God! Don't you realize? I'd rather think you're carried away, that you don't know what you're saying, that you never wrote that letter, that you never said what you've said. I'd rather think you acted in order to help me, to give my children a name and a station. And I'd like to repay you, don't you understand?--because I'm not at all ungrateful, believe me. You have a son. If I could do for him what you've done for mine . . ."

"I'm telling you: there's no comparison. It annoys me to hear you

insist. I've recognized him as my son, made him my heir. Everything's in order; everything's been taken care of. Don't compare me . . . it's depressing"--and I glanced at the shrewd grocer on the wall.

"Life has so many ups and downs! Who knows if one day . . . If you ever need me, don't hesitate an instant. I'm in your debt; whenever you like, I'll pay you back in kind."

The light grew more liquid and shimmery. For a moment, I thought it would crystallize in a tear. Suddenly her normal look returned, distant and steely.

V

... la griffe effroyable de Dieu.

Sierra Calva, August 28

Once again we're on the road, marching by night and hiding by day.
From a hut comes our major's voice, deep and boozy:

I loved a girl from Olivet
but she didn't love me.

Olivet de la Virgen is gone. It's now just one of many villages
sinking into a phantasmagoric past. Where are those roses the girls stuck
in our lapels the day we arrived? Those dark-red roses, "the color of the
cloak on an Ecce Homo . . ." They all came in their Sunday best, with the
mayor and his council, to beg us not to leave. They were scared that if
we left, the anarchists would come back. The major talked himself blue in
the face trying to make them understand that staying or leaving wasn't up
to us.

"Don't you like it here in Olivet?" they insisted.

As for Olegaria, big tears flowed from her red, rheumy eyes. Gallart
was there. Later, when the last houses were out of sight, he confessed,
"Damn, I had a lump in my throat!"

We've occupied positions along the barren crest of this mountain
range. Before us stretches the steppe. With my binoculars, I can see the
zig-zagging enemy trenches. Behind them is Puebla de Ladrón.

The main engagement is about nine miles to our east. Two divisions
are attacking the town of Chilte, a place no one's ever heard of, but
important because it constitutes an advanced enemy position within our
lines. Puebla de Ladrón is the beginning of the bulge--that's why we
wanted to take it. Our division is advancing in a pincer movement, with

our brigade on the left and the "flatfeet" on our right.

Day is breaking. Suddenly, silently, a line of little ^{pull} clouds rises from the earth on the far side of the enemy lines. I focus my binoculars.

Another line, equally silent, rises up at this instant, but on our side of their trenches, between the trenches and the barbed wire. The boom from the first explosions now reaches me; it took fifteen seconds. About three miles, I estimate. In fact, it was closer. I must not have noted the two times exactly on my chronometer. A third volley kicks up lots of white mushrooms in the fascist trenches, following their zig-zags. "Beautiful," Picó would say; he feels a boundless admiration for gunners and trigonometry. Now that our gunners have found their range, they're bombarding the trenches with such rapid volleys that the boom of each round fades into the next one. I didn't know our attack on Puebla de Ladrón was going to start like this. It's the heaviest shelling I've seen in the war. If they can keep up this pace for an hour, assuming their guns hold out, there won't be a soul left alive.

The first slanting ray of sunlight strikes the trenches, allowing me to see them through my binoculars with rare precision.

The fascists are abandoning them. They're civil guards: at times the sun glints off the patent leather on their three-cornered hats. Reputable civil guards, always wearing those hats! But what are they doing? They climb out of the trenches, where our shells keep falling, but not to retreat toward Puebla de Ladrón. Quite the contrary. They leap over the parapets and flatten themselves between the trenches and the wire. Motionless, evenly spaced, now you'd take them for a bunch of alligators lazily lying on a riverbank. Someone should tell the batteries. They're wasting ammunition shelling empty trenches. They should adjust their aim; a few yards this way and those civil guards would be flying in all directions.

Doughty civil guards! There was no way for me to contact the gunners, and now it's too late. Our infantry is moving, hunched over, toward the wires. The batteries have stopped firing. All at once, the civil guards return to their trenches. Now I can hear the metallic, insectlike rat-a-tat-tat of their machine guns. Some of our men drop ~~between the wires.~~

I don't want to look. I return to the hut.

I'm writing by the light from the fire. Mornings are cold on these desolate heights. The simmering soup that will be our breakfast keeps me company. The officers' eating clubs are a thing of the past. From the brigade's commander down to the humblest recruit, we all get the same rations. Blessed equality of army soup!

Sierra Calva, August 31

The fourth company has remained in reserve on this mountaintop, while the other three advance toward Puebla de Ladrón. Yesterday, our enemies finally abandoned their trenches, which our artillery had destroyed, and took refuge in the village's houses, where they prepared to make a stand.

We had to wipe them out with artillery and planes. Now, when I look through my binoculars, all I can see is the shells of buildings. The empty interiors can be seen through the gaping holes that used to be windows. There's nothing inside; it makes me think of the mummies in Olivél.

Night's falling. Up until a few minutes ago, I could hear the insistent tapping of a woodpecker in a pine grove. Now a vast calm has fallen, broken only by an occasional mortar shell and the crickets.

It seems that as I write, the Flatfoot Brigade is taking care of the last pockets of resistance in Puebla de Ladrón. To tell the truth, they fought magnificently, but I wouldn't dare say so to anyone in our brigade.

Sierra Calva, September 1

2X We're still in reserve. The other companies are fighting beyond Puebla de Ladrón, to our northeast. The enemy has launched a fierce counterattack. ~~Softened~~ ^{ruined} by the distance, the concert of mortars and machine-guns reminds me of a cheerfully bubbling pot.

X Every night, we three lieutenants gather in the captain's hut, in the center of our position, which is a two-mile stretch of mountaintop. We tell stories; Gallart has an inexhaustible supply. His forte is tales about his unrequited loves, including Melitona. According to him, he's always been rebuffed as a suitor, a tragic case of misfortune only comparable to certain Romantic poets. But he declares that his most dramatic mishaps pale by comparison with what he suffered ~~with~~ ^{from} Melitona. "She gave me some slaps that almost dislocated my jaw. That girl's got a heavy hand; you stagger when she hits you." His duel with Commissar Rebull is another astonishing epic, though there was no actual bloodshed. If only all epics ended so peacefully!

The moonless nights on this barren mountaintop are phenomenal! Seen through the dry, desert air, the stars sparkle like piercing eyes that peer right through you. I know the constellations, and I pass the time observing the planets' changing positions from night to night. It was Cruells who taught me the rudiments of astronomy; at first I couldn't tell one star from another. When I return to my hut a little before dawn, what astounds me most is the strange peace. The men stopped their killing a while ago. All I can hear is the faint rustle of the night breeze and the far-off cackle of a coal tit, who seems to mock our wretched victories.

Sierra Calva, September 2

I had a dream--I, who never dream.

It was a sort of ancient temple, in ruins, very big, on a cliff. Someone walked toward me through its dark interior, and I could hear the sea, like the steady breathing of a sleeping animal. The man coming toward me wore a kind of cassock, and though his eyes were open, he couldn't see. He clasped a portable telescope and peered through it, but he saw nothing. He was sleepwalking. There were lots of suitcases, huge trunks, bass fiddles, pianos, and mummies. The sleepwalker picked his way among them without bumping into anything, despite the fact that he couldn't see. Among the mummies was Soleràs, and there were other faces I recognized, but although they were strangely familiar I can't say who they were. How still those mummies were, still as the trunks and suitcases. It was a disturbing stillness--disturbing like big suitcases when you don't know what's inside them. They saw me pass without looking at me or moving, but they made a supreme effort to tell me something; always the same thing. They couldn't talk. In the background, a big altar glowed. The sleepwalker approached it and looked through his telescope at the image above it. It was like a Virgin--perhaps a Mater Dolorosa? She had things sticking out of her, but they weren't really daggers. They looked more like bayonets. Dressed in heavy silk, she was like another mummy, so still and yellow, and the sleepwalker got closer but never quite reached her. His cassock had grown longer till it trailed behind him in an enormous black train. I felt a confused terror and tried to pray, but my voice wouldn't come out. I was another voiceless mummy, lost among the others, among those suitcases and trunks. My voice wouldn't come out, as though a hand were choking me, and the ^{Virgin}~~idol's~~ eyes glinted in the darkness like a cat's. The vaults of that sort of temple slowly dropped; now it was like a cave or tunnel full of spiderwebs and bats hanging in clusters. Then the

sleepwalker made a strange gesture, as though with his telescope (or had the telescope turned into an iron bar?) he were striking someone who stirred in the darkness--a sharp, terrible crack on the skull of someone who stirred and moaned amid the shadows . . .

I woke with a start in the middle of this dream. At such moments, before falling back to sleep, one possesses the lucidity attributed to the dying. Floating between reality and what's beyond it, you see everything clearly. Now I can't understand that dream. I only recall that it was fascinating, oppressive, hot, ominous--and full of meaning.

Sierra Calva, September 3

At nightfall, I was making the rounds of the two miles of mountaintop occupied by the fourth company. I was on guard duty. In the half-light, I saw a tall, skinny man standing by the parapet with his back to me. What attracted my attention was his costume, so different from ours: velvet pants; high leather boots, well-polished and with silver spurs. He was in shirtsleeves, but instead of being khaki, his shirt was pale blue. A pale blue shirt, here? In over a year of war, I'd seen some bizarre uniforms, but that pale blue shirt really took the cake.

This mystery man, leaning over the parapet as though he were standing on a balcony, gazed out at the shadowy plain at the foot of Sierra Calva. He seemed ~~absorbed~~ ^{lost in} in thought. I could still hear the far-off sputtering of rifles, grenades, and machine guns, interrupted from time to time by a mortar's deeper note--all with that morendo a battle takes on as it fades away at nightfall.

At my "Who goes there?" he turned around. It was Soleràs.

I brought him into my hut for a drop of cognac, since it was cold out. I was astonished to have run into him up here. And we talked all

X night^{long}

He talked about so many things . . . He said he's sick of being a staff sergeant, of the transport section, of all those chickpeas. "If you knew what phenomenal quantities of chickpeas the pigs in this brigade guzzle . . ." He's planning to ask the division to assign him as a plain soldier to any infantry unit, "even one in the Flatfoot Brigade."

"As long as it's not yours. I couldn't stand being at your orders! Though really, what difference would it make? Maybe it would be a great idea: a common soldier, precisely under your command!"

"And might one ask what you're doing up here?"

X "I've come to enjoy the show. You have such a splendid view of the battle: ^{the} the enemy's positions and ours, the troop movements, the trajectories of those 85-caliber mortars--it's like an eighteenth-century print. The bastards taking part in it, on the other hand, can't see a thing. They can't see the wood for the trees, and besides, they have other things to think about."

X "And where did you get ^{that} ~~this~~ extraordinary uniform?"

X "Humph. I designed it myself. I spend a lot of time in the rear with my ^{own} ~~service corps truck~~--I think I already told you about that--and between this flashy uniform and a few battle stories, they take me for a hero. I keep quiet about ^{the} ~~those~~ chickpeas; what business is it of theirs? On the other hand, with a few cans of condensed milk, ~~Farmer brand~~ . . ."

X "You've turned into a hysteric."

2X Silence. We were curled up at one end of the hut, near the fire. I'd lit a hanging oil lamp. Its dim light caught the gnarled trunks holding up the ceiling made of branches and packed earth. Field mice scurry over the roof at night, attracted by the bread crumbs and other scraps from our meals. ^A ~~The~~ cold wind blew ^I ~~in~~ through the cracks. From time to time, a

mouse dislodged some dirt, which rained down in a fine dust. The oil lamp's flame flickered.

"A hysteric? Well, why not?" he said, wiping the cognac from his lips. "Women think I'm 'not like other men.' And they confide in me; they think I'm purer than the rest of you," and he laughed that obnoxious cackling laugh of his, staring straight at me. "To think Saint Philomena appears to my aunt in person, as though it were the most normal thing in the world . . ."

"You're nuttier than ever, Juli. What's the point of all this nonsense?"

"You're an innocent. You admire me; you can't help it. And to tell the truth, I couldn't care less about your admiration. We shouldn't see each other, Lluís. Why is that so hard for you to understand?"

"This time it's you who came to visit me."

"Yes . . . that's true. This time it was me. I must have had some weighty motive, believe me. Without some weighty motive, it's not likely that I would have done it. Let's see if we can figure out what the motive was. Why did I come? It's so hard to isolate a single motive, especially when it's truly weighty! Because don't kid yourself. We don't know a thing about our weightiest motives. Maybe I came precisely because I shouldn't have come, precisely because we shouldn't see each other. In detective novels, which are the only ones I read nowadays, since I already know Roland Cuckolded by heart, murderers always return to the scene of the ^s crime. They're obsessed; they can't tear themselves away from their victims' corpses. Maybe you're a corpse and don't know it; maybe I . . ."

"Me: a corpse? I'm not in any mood to put up with insults!"

"I'm not asking you to put up with them. I'm not asking you to put up with anything. In fact, I'm asking just the opposite. There's something

that comes between you and me, Lluís. Yes, that's it: there's something in the way. You're not a corpse; nothing of the sort. But with you I can talk about corpses. You're one of the few people I can talk to about them. The macabre is banned from polite conversation, like the obscene. The beginning and the end: it's forbidden even to mention them! With you, on the other hand, I can talk about them as casually as about the weather. You're one of the few people able to listen and even--why deny it?--to understand. But let's go back to what I was saying. What do you think of women who sell themselves or, to be more exact, rent themselves out? For a truly modest fee, extremely modest in some cases! Some of them would follow you to the ends of the earth for a can of condensed milk. But they're so horribly passive . . . it's like sleeping with a mummy, don't you think? Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night and suddenly think I'm entwined with a mummy for all eternity . . . We can deny the existence of Heaven, even think of it as a Sunday school play. It's hell whose existence no one can deny. It follows us wherever we go, like shit stuck to the bottoms of our shoes."

"Theology's not my strong point," I replied, "but I imagine that if there's an afterlife, it would be strict justice. If we all behaved like you, if out of some perverse cynicism we dug around in our nastiest wounds, don't you think we'd all end up as neurasthenic as you? Get it out of your head that you're more perverse than everyone else. Can't you understand that it's nothing but pride? We're all buried in a sea of mud, Juli. I've done things that . . . I'm sure you've never sunk so low! We have to try and keep the mud from covering our eyes! *Not lose sight of* ~~To keep seeing~~ the stars . . ."

"You're inspired today," he interrupted sarcastically, in his bass-opera voice. He poured another drink from the canteen. "But what do you know about stars? Does Cruells show them to you through his telescope?"

Bah, nonsense . . . Cruells is nothing but a sleepwalker, and if he keeps wasting his time stargazing, he'll never get to be bishop. And anyway, what wouldn't the stars give to be like us? Let's stick to the subject. Women aren't mistaken about you; they can see at a glance that you're a man like all the others. I, on the other hand . . . 'I feel I can talk to you like a brother . . . ' Idiots! Since when could anyone talk to a brother?"

X Outside, the far-off sounds of battle had ~~been~~ ^I gradually ~~dying~~ ^{died} away; pure, moonless night and nothing else. He sipped his cognac, peering at the aluminum cup from time to time with his nearsighted gaze like someone examining a rare insect.

X "And how they love to confide in me! Once they get started there's ~~no end to it~~ ^{stopping them.} No one understands them, poor things! They have such a desperate need to be understood . . . What a nuisance they can be if you don't watch your step."

I listened to his blather, wondering where it would lead.

X X "It turns out that I have a knack for understanding them, as far as I've been able to make out. You, on the other hand ^{straight} ~~since~~ you don't understand them, you go ~~right~~ ^{straight} for the jugular. You don't waste time understanding them. You plow full-speed ahead. The strangest thing is that you and I are attracted to the same women."

"Listen, Juli: stop talking nonsense. The same women?"

"Don't make that idiotic face. You look like our economics professor. You implied as much yourself a moment ago: 'I've done things that . . . ' I know exactly what you've done."

"What are you talking about?"

"About your latest adventure."

"What adventure?"

"Olivela! And since we're on that subject, allow me to congratulate

you. What a dame! Sensational . . . She's worthy of those lines by
Baudelaire:

Ce qu'il faut à ce cœur profond ~~comme~~ un abi

c'est vous, Lady Mâlepuissante au crime . . ."

"Nothing's happened between us, you understand? You must have
gotten these fantasies from ~~these~~ novels about . . ."

"About what?"

"About whores."

He stared at me with his nearsighted gaze, which nonetheless was so
penetrating and sarcastic that it made me blush. And still staring at me,
he slowly said, in his deepest bass voice, "Eppur si muove."

#

I would have liked the earth to open and swallow me up. My hands
trembled. I could feel my face burning. He'd stopped staring at me and
was drinking a long swig from the canteen.

"Tell me what you mean," I managed to blurt out. "What you're
implying is a dirty lie!"

"Call it what you like. You can't convince me that you fabricate
marriage certificates . . . for nothing. Admit it: that registry was just
what you needed. Now tell me if I'm not a good friend, if I'm not
generous, if I don't fly to the aid of a pal who's in a jam. And with
absolute discretion. Admit that until now it hadn't occurred to you that I'd
left it there. I could have sold it to you: supply and demand. You
remember our economics professor? A perfect imbecile, unable to even
suspect that there were things beyond supply and demand. But I'm an
imbecile too, even if I'm not a pedant. To think that canon law was my
specialty, and especially marriages in articulo mortis . . . I knew
everything there was to know about them! The association has always

fascinated me: wedding nights and death; the obscene and the macabre . .

. One would think, therefore, that this idea of a wedding in extremis would have been mine. But no; it was her idea. When I met her, she'd already figured it all out. It's not that she'd studied canon law, but she's as sharp as they come. Sometimes I've even suspected . . ."--he looked at me as though wondering whether to say it--"and why not? He was certainly a swine, and if we started hypothesizing . . ."

"I don't understand what you mean."

"Enrique was the last one killed. Why would they save him for last?"

X ~~He~~ He was an utter nonentity. Let's face it: he was a moron, incapable of ~~having~~ political opinions of any sort. I don't even think he was a Carlist. Why should the anarchists have had anything against him? The idea of killing him might have been suggested by someone else . . ."

"Suggested?"

"Olivela, as you know from experience, has remarkable powers of suggestion . . ."

"I'll never believe that!"--and I suddenly thought of those two praying mantises.

"So much the worse for you. She's more like a character in a novel than you think. That was just my point: you don't understand them. Ame puissante au crime . . . Just like a novel! She was wasted on you! ~~It's like~~ they say: ~~e~~

X "If you understand her so well, why didn't you ~~take care of it?~~ ~~forge the certificate?~~"

X "That idea, like so many good ideas, had one drawback: it wasn't practicable. You're forgetting that at ~~the~~ ^{the} time Olivela was in anarchist territory. I went there secretly, in civilian clothes. Strictly incognito, you might say. A church wedding in articulo mortis in anarchist territory wasn't easy to arrange. How could you get an anarchist committee (and

don't forget that the mayor and his council had made themselves scarce)
to recognize the monks' signatures and the documents' authenticity?
Olivela, after suggesting the idea--as I said, she has remarkable powers of
suggestion, without the suggestion seeming to come from her--backed away
from it. She hesitated. 'No; that wouldn't be right. It would be a forgery.'
She spoke as if I'd been the one to propose it. You see, she'd realized
that it couldn't be done as long as the anarchists ruled Olivela. We always
have pangs of conscience when we have nothing to gain by ignoring them.
The last time I saw her, she was sublime. 'You misunderstood me. Let me
tell you I'm not interested in forgeries, and even less in your
propositions.'"

"What propositions?"

X "What propositions do you think? The same ones you made, except
that in your case she said yes, a trivial difference. Oof"--a sigh and a
pause--"Don't you remember your criminal law? Indecent ~~proposals~~ ^{propositions}. She has
a very delicate sensibility. I don't know if you've noticed. She's very pure--
that is, emotionless. Because to a greater or lesser degree, emotions are
always dirty, don't deny it. And I disgusted her. I filled her with the most
exquisite disgust. I could see it in her eyes: a mixture of fear and disgust.
And believe me: disgusting someone is difficult. It's hard to keep the
conversation going and lead it around to where you want it to go without
someone breaking your train of thought! One day I asked her what the
deceased's favorite sexual perversions were. It would be very unusual for a
deceased like him not to practice some kind of sexual perversion . . ."

"Juli, you're a fool."

"Thank you. Maybe you don't realize that I could turn you in as a
forger and you'd get a few years in prison."

"Do as you like. It's up to you. But think of those two children:

they'd be bastards again."

"You did it all for them, right? For those two poor little orphans. That's really sublime, Lluís. Congratulations."

X "Don't be ~~a idiot~~ ^{a fool}. Answer me: would you really turn me in?"

"I already have."

Silence. My hand, which was shaking, groped for my back pocket, but I remembered that my pistol wasn't loaded (I always keep it unloaded). Very calmly, he poured some more cognac into his cup.

"I reported what you'd done, Lluís, not to a judge but to your wife. I told her in full detail about your adventures with the most novelistic lady in Olivet."

"You're a jackass. What does Trini have to do with all this?"

"Maybe the jackass is you. You think she has nothing to do with it? You think just because a woman's yours that you can leave her to fend for herself? The poor things complain that their husbands don't understand them. They complain, and rightly, that their husbands have betrayed them."

I grabbed the canteen out of his hand and flung it at his head. The cognac trickled down his face and stained his pale-blue shirt. Without altering his expression, he wiped it off with his handkerchief and said, "You think I'm insufferable, but you're the insufferable one. One can't discuss anything with you!"

Puebla de Ladrón, September 19

Two weeks of phantasmagoria for all us poor sleepwalkers . . .

The fourth company was called out of reserve on account of the enemy's fierce counterattack. We've suffered a lot of casualties.

Now they've given us a little rest here in Puebla, where we've been bombarded by howitzers, mortars, and even stray machine-gun bullets.

Their air force shits on us two or three times a day. We have lookouts in the steeple to sound the alarm, and that's exactly how they do it: "They're shitting!" Because they only sound the alarm when they see the planes release their bombs. If they sounded it every time a squadron passed, we'd spend all day in our cave.

Our "cave" is the cellar of the only house still standing, a solid stone edifice, perhaps from the fifteenth century. The cellar has stone arches. The bombs reverberate through it like a prophet's voice through catacombs, and the dust that ^{rains} falls down the winding staircase makes us cough.

Puebla consists of virtually nothing but this house and a ruined church. The rest is a pile of rubble. The main street is full of parchments and old documents. A bomb exploded in the parish archives and sent them flying. I don't always go down to the cave when they sound the alarm. After a while, you get tired of it. Sometimes I prefer to watch the planes release their bombs. They look like insects dropping long eggs as they fly ^{over us.} ~~past~~ I amuse myself by reading the documents. It's strange how in the fifteenth century, and even at the beginning of the sixteenth, documents in this area were still written in a mixture of Catalan and Aragonese.

These last two weeks, I've lived as though under the effects of a strong dose of cocaine. I feel strangely happy. Now I know that we reconquered Puebla, which the enemy had taken in its counteroffensive. We didn't find a living soul except lice. Incredible quantities of lice! We never stop scratching!

Could I give you a coherent explanation of what I did during those two weeks? No. Battles leave no memories. You do and say things as though someone else were dictating them to you. I vaguely remember that I moved--nothing else.

I remember a field, barren or covered with stubble. The fascists had positioned their machine guns as though they'd attended my lecture in Olivet. The crossfire was at the level of our bellies. It was impossible to move. And the order was to attack--without cover. We had no tanks.

Gallart, leading the company, was the first to fall, followed shortly by the Orator. I remember lavender stems bent in the wind. From time to time one of them snapped, as though cut by an invisible scythe. The recruits were weeping; it was the first time they'd seen the face of war. The other officer, one Miralles, fell, and I found myself leading three platoons. We lost almost half the company. We retreated to a grove of pine and savin trees. Seventy-five caliber shells and mortar rounds fell among the pines, but compared to the field, it seemed an oasis of peace. The wounded posed a problem. We heard them screaming. Some of their voices broke in a kind of gurgle, like the sound of a cock being beheaded. We had no way to communicate with the battalion. Behind the grove was another treeless field, also swept by machine-gun fire. The recruits realized how forsaken the wounded are. We couldn't even think of trying to rescue them! We'd lose more men than we'd save. I didn't know what to do. How could I get through to the major?

As I was wondering, I saw an officer advancing with a few soldiers across that field behind us. They crept forward on all fours to dodge the bullets, but also to run something along the ground. It was Rebull, the commissar, with a telephone line.

2X The major had finally managed to turn him into a signal corps officer! Incredible as it may seem, when ~~the~~^{our} battalion ~~was sent~~^{went} into battle, headquarters still hadn't sent us a signal corps officer. So here was Rebull, replacing the non-existent officer as best he could. He managed to stay closer to the ground than the bullets whizzing around him like a

swarm of mosquitos. He was sweating with terror. I thought of those stupid practical jokes we'd played on him in Olivel; now I could have wept to see him working so hard. I couldn't help embracing him. He looked at me in surprise, his pipe clenched between his teeth, as though my expansiveness had struck him as out of place and sentimental. He handed me the telephone. Major Rosich was on the line.

"At your orders, major. Captain Gallart is dead, and I'm afraid the two lieutenants are too. We can't hear their voices. I've taken charge of the company."

24 shut
make those damned machine guns shut up."

"There are lots of wounded, major. They're lying there bleeding in the field."

X "Don't try anything until the mortars arrive. You'll
That'd finish off the fourth company, the only one we have left. They won't take long to get there. Remember my owl? It died too."

We spent a few days hiding in that grove. In spite of the mortars, the enemy machine guns mowed us down every time we tried to break out. We'd finished all our rations and water.

I remember our last, desperate sortie as though it were a hallucination.

The recruits followed me with blind faith. I had only one thought: keep moving! I heard the machine guns as though I were sitting in Uncle Eusebi's office with his four secretaries all typing away. I heard them, of course, in front of us. Suddenly I began to hear others behind us. Were we trapped? They made a different sound: like partridges instead of typewriters. They were obviously different guns, a different model. They were ours.

X At times we even heard, borne along on gusts of wind, ^{snatch} bits of the song Picó had composed for his gunners:

ital { Mortars sing
and bullets zing
around the fascists . . .

The two mortars kept busy. We were under the parabola traced by their shells, and I must say they were doing a good job. A lot of them scored direct hits on the "fascists'" machine-gun nests. Who came up with that word? At the front it's what we always call them. And the recruits followed me. Some fell; the others didn't even look at them. They were in a trance . . . What's this? What else could it be? Barbed wire! How could we have reached it so quickly?

The mortars had taken out some of the stakes. With our rifle butts we tried to widen the breaches. Quickly; otherwise no one would be left to tell the tale. Now we were between the barbed wire and their trenches. Only a hundred feet away! A hundred feet uphill; we'd have to make a dash for it if we wanted to get there alive!

"They're surrendering!" I heard people shouting to my left.

X I saw a tall, very thin man standing on the parapet. He was dressed in rags, with a two-week beard and covered with dust. A ^{bum} ~~beggar~~, I thought. What's that ^{bum} ~~beggar~~ doing on the parapet?

X "Stop firing! They're surrendering!" I heard some hoarse shouts from my men.

It's a shame that it takes longer to describe than to live through a moment like this. Brothers! Stop firing! Let's not kill each other any more! How could we have been so stupid? How lovely that moment was . . . Had we died and gone to Heaven? Maybe we were all dead and that fascist dressed in tatters was an angel coming to welcome us.

The ragged angel was winking at his men, hidden in their trench. I watched him through my binoculars. And he was secretly motioning to them with his left hand like an orchestra conductor. Which symphony did he want them to play? Something in our honor, obviously. "The Death of Ase"? I understood it as though I'd read his mind. Have your grenades ready, and when they're about to embrace us . . .

It was an old trick we'd played ourselves in similar circumstances. My men threw down their rifles to have their hands free, overcome by enthusiasm. I suddenly remembered that they were recruits and didn't know about such ruses.

"Don't let him fool you!" But they couldn't hear me. Shouts and confusion; they were entranced by those arms reaching out to embrace them. My God, how deep the wish to be brothers is!--and how we use it to kill each other . . . "Idiots!" I shouted again, but my voice was lost amid the uproar. My hand, as though thinking for itself, reached into my back pocket, and I found myself holding my pistol. I took careful aim at the man gesturing on the parapet, lining him up with the shiny sight. Gently and voluptuously, I squeezed the trigger. As I released it, I heard a ridiculous little click. The pistol wasn't loaded.

A dead soldier was lying a few feet away. I vaguely recalled that his name was Esplugues and he was from Arbeca. I took his rifle. Or maybe his name was Arbeca and he was from Esplugues. What difference did it make? That wasn't the point! I felt the recoil; magnificent! And the ragged angel fell forward like a puppet.

My men finally understood. Now they understood everything! The assault was a massacre. They plunged their knives into the fascists' bellies--even the ones who were on their knees begging for mercy. My shouts were lost in the tumult.

"Stop that, you jackasses! Leave them alone! That's enough killing!"

2X At least now they were all dead; we couldn't kill anymore. Our throats were parched. What a torment thirst is! Picó managed to send us one of his mules with a waterskin. We drank greedily. Though warm and muddy, it ~~tasted~~ ^{seemed} like the most delicious water we'd ever ~~had~~ ^{tasted}.

X What a strange calm came over us, once we were full of water! We didn't dare to look at each other, as though we were condemned from that moment ~~on~~ ^I to share a guilty secret. After this, will we ever be able to look each other in the eye?

And then other days, other battles, other trenches. It turned out that the enemy, unlike us, had three lines of trenches. How demoralizing it was, after storming one line, to find another a few hundred yards away. Everything we'd done counted for nothing; we had to start all over again.

I remember a wood burning on three sides. They'd firebombed it. We couldn't get out. It was a flaming island surrounded by a sea of machine guns. We ate our half-charred bread. The sour smell of that grove has stayed with me and often returns--and the recruits' sad, obscene songs.

We slept as best we could, in little hollows each man carved out. What clear nights! Looking up at the sky, hearing the whistle of an occasional stray bullet--and above me Cygnus's cross, which Cruells had taught me to find. Gazing up at that starry cross, I thought of you, Ramon, and of Trini and of our son, and I fell asleep reciting a paternoster. How wonderfully the four nails on that cross kept me company, twinkling in the depths of the infinite! My God, how helpless we all are, and how desperately we need company!

September 21

One thing bothers me. I went through that dead second lieutenant's

pockets, as we'd been ordered to do. I can tell you: it's the most obnoxious part of our job. But it has to be done. You never know what you might find among an enemy officer's papers. This one had nothing on him except some letters: letters from a girl, talking about how they'd get married once the war was over. Four letters he'd kept in a single envelope. Without this single envelope, I wouldn't feel so bewildered. It turns out his name was Antonio López Fernández.

Olegaria had never told me her grandson was a second lieutenant, but he might have won his stripes a short while ago, and since she only heard from him very occasionally, through the International Red Cross . . .

I'd rather think it was a coincidence. It's such a common name!

But I still haven't told you the worst part: the next day, when we were burying the corpses in a big ditch, I found that someone had mutilated him. They'd cut through his pants . . . I'd like to find the coward who did it and shoot him in front of the whole company.

September 22

This incident keeps weighing on my mind. War has some really horrible aspects. If I were killing someone I had a grudge against! Or maybe it's better this way. We'd all die sooner or later, even if there were no wars. The bad part, then, isn't the fact that we kill each other but rather our hatred. Let's kill each other, since that's our duty, but without hatred. As Soleràs once put it, "Let's kill each other like good buddies."

I'm not sure what I should do: write to the girl? Her name and address are on the back of the envelope: Irene Natalia Royo Jalón.

But what should I tell her? "Dear Miss Royo: It is my pleasure to inform you that I've just killed your fiancé . . ." That's absurd. I should try to forget about it. And it would be so complicated getting a letter

through to her. By way of the International Red Cross, or through an embassy . . . "Dear Miss Royo: It is with deep regret that I must inform you of Antonio López Fernández's heroic death. Standing bravely on the parapet as we attacked . . ." I don't have to say I killed him. "We buried him with full honors, as such a valiant foe deserved." And that mutilation? Silence! If I could find the bastard . . . There's a soldier named Pàmies who looks like it should have been him: a cunning, stupid expression; hunched-over like a whipped dog; a sly grimace like that mummy in the monastery. But I can't shoot a man just because I don't like his looks!

X
X
I can't possibly shoot him. It's not customary to shoot mummies. The quartermaster came to tell me ^{it was} ~~it's~~ time to eat. The men were lined up in front of ^a ~~the~~ huge blackened pot, all dressed in tatters, with matted hair and faces black as that pot--not to mention their grubby two-week beards. It's lucky no one can see his own face, and it's terrifying to think how we must stink, though luckily, we can't smell it. But at least our eyes shine, our eyes look and see; and dream . . . They dream of life, of life hot and strong, without mutilations, that awaits us at the end of the war, that always awaits us. Beyond all this misery, our dreams persist in spite of everything. "Line up, two by two!" They obeyed mechanically, holding their tin plates, those plates that are never washed (it's hard enough getting water to drink!) and that give a rancid taste to whatever we ^{ladle} ~~eat~~ ^{go onto} ~~eat~~ them. I inspected the men, and as I passed, I looked into each one's eyes and read his dreams: maybe a wife or child; maybe a modest little apartment in Gràcia or Barceloneta; maybe a kiss, never given, that would have shaken the world . . . Finally, I saw those dreamless eyes, those mummy-eyes; those crafty eyes of one who believes in nothing. Just as it had that other time, my mouth filled with spit; but this time the gob silently hit that face and slid slowly down that stubbly beard like a fat

worm. Pàmies didn't bat an eyelash, the others' eyes were full of their own dreams, and a vertical cloud of steam rose heavenward from the pot as in Abel's sacrifice, spreading a heavy wool-like stench: the eternal mutton they always give us. God Almighty: why dost Thou suffer Cain's seed to survive on earth?

It's definitely hard for me to believe that the dead second lieutenant was Olegaria's grandson. She'd never told me he was engaged. Of course, he could have met this Irene in fascist territory. She lives far from his village. Those four letters don't offer many clues: that she's not very *well educated*, ~~cultured~~, as Picó would say, and precious little else. In particular, there's an absolutely authentic "I luv you." But then, spelling mistakes are so common . . . Do you remember when our cousin Julieta wrote "Dareling Lluís, I adoor you"?

Falguera de los Cabezos, October 9

The area we'd captured with so many casualties was a barren plain, the color of gray clay, surrounded by equally treeless mountains. Their peaks resembled geometric forms--pyramids and truncated cones--and at sunrise and sunset, the oblique light cast sharp, angular shadows and the whole thing looked like the buitrera in Olivet. The place certainly had its *charm* ~~fascination~~: pure geometry and clean stone. Life is dirty. Leaving Chilte and Puebla de Ladrón behind, we wandered with what was left of our battalion through that lunar landscape full of craters. Now we were the advanced pocket behind the enemy's lines.

Once we got cut off. It was two days since we'd eaten or drunk. We were on the north side of a hill, where the enemy's artillery couldn't reach us, but all the escape routes were covered by their mortars and machine guns. Two officers from our service corps managed to slip past

them with a mule. As they were coming back, a shell burst a few feet from the animal, and its belly opened like a big flower. Three days later its smell reached us, carried by the breeze--what a cynical smell, amid all that silence! Why can't we be solid, like statues?

X
X
Now we're far from that plain. The ~~enemy's~~ ^{fascists have} given up an extensive area instead of fighting over our advanced positions as we thought ~~he~~ ^{they} would. There's a long valley between us, one to five miles wide, that's become "no man's land." Its four or five hamlets are intact but deserted.

X
Los Cabezos is a mountain range covered with pines, cool and verdant. It has springs and brooks. The shepherd's hut where I'm staying is near one of them, and I can swim in a pool where the water reaches my neck. The leaves on the elms and poplars come in a thousand shades, from yellowish green to reddish purple, and there are some lush meadows by the brook. Men from the villages ^{to} ~~in~~ our rear pasture cows and goats. Life in those villages quickly returned to normal once a new front had been established. I don't think they care much that a different flag now flies above the positions that protect them. As Olegaria used to say, "We're all the same."

The area around here is more range than farmland. There are no tilled fields, but the sound of tinkling bells is delightful after so many weeks of rattling machine guns and bursting shells. The goatherds sell us milk that otherwise they would throw away, since the locals never drink it. Their herds consist of mountain goats with long, silky hair and graceful horns.

Every day, when the sun sets, the woodpeckers at the bottoms of wooded gorges make a sound that, with a little imagination, you might take for a whinny, which is why the locals call them "horses." It's their way of bidding farewell to the dying day. After that, all you hear is

hooting owls and cackling coal tits.

X But the woodpecker's farewell doesn't express melancholy; on the contrary, it's full of optimism and good cheer. Late one afternoon I was alone in a pine grove. Lying on a bed of pine needles, I was smoking and daydreaming. I kept so still that the woodpecker didn't notice me. He was busily working on a tree trunk with pecks so fierce that they resounded like blows from a hammer ~~in the~~ ² silence. The rays of sunlight filtering through the boughs sometimes struck his feathers, which flashed crimson, green, and yellow speckled with black and white. With his claws embedded in the trunk, he must have been engaged in an extremely important piece of work, since he didn't notice me slowly approaching. When he finally spotted me, instead of flying off he moved to the other side of the trunk. He stuck his head out to see what I was up to. I also went around to the other side, and he repeated the operation as though we were playing hide-and-seek. He kept sticking his head out, and his bright, apprehensive eyes were a joy to behold. I tried to catch him, at which point he flew off, calling loudly as though he wanted to warn every bird in that grove.

X From the top of Cabezo Mayor, on very clear days, you can make out a bluish line on the misty horizon, lost in the distance to our northeast. Sometimes I sit on a high rock and spend a long time with my binoculars, trying to see those peaks covered with snow all year round. My heart tells me that they're the beginning of Catalonia. I've been away for almost a year and a half; a year and half without ~~seeing~~ ^e Trini or our son. Up till now I haven't felt homesick. Why this change? I can feel something strange that weighs on my chest; no, it isn't my chest. It's in my stomach. As though I'd eaten something bad, something that bothers you until you finally throw it up.

The paramedic visits me from time to time with his telescope. We

gaze at Venus, which now sparkles like a trembling tear, till well after sundown. It's in its "maximum elongation," Cruells told me. His telescope is a nineteenth-century sea captain's spyglass--or did I already describe it to you?--whose parts fit inside each other. Packed up, it's less than a foot long, but assembled it's more than a yard. These last few evenings, Venus has looked like the slenderest sliver of new moon. That high rock is our observatory, where the treetops don't come between us and the sky.

One evening, as we were sitting on that famous rock amusing ourselves by looking at the crescent moon's craters and seas, he suddenly asked me if I was feeling all right.

"Not bad. Why do you ask?"

"You look pale, as though you'd eaten something that didn't agree with you."

I stared in him in surprise.

"I've been feeling this way for a while. There's something weighing on me inside. Maybe it's nonsense, but it upsets my stomach. How do you vomit up nonsense? Can you hear my confession?"

He shook his head gravely.

"I'm not ordained."

"I don't care about that. All I want is for you to listen to me. Who else can I tell? I don't know if I believe in God, and maybe deep down I don't care one way or the other. But what's undeniable is that there's a weight in my stomach."

I told him about that second lieutenant, including the mutilation.

"I'll never rest easy till I've shot the son of a bitch who . . ."

"What good would that do?" He shook his head again. "He's dead; don't worry about him. You did your duty and he did his. Pray for his soul and stop fretting about him, believe me. That's what war is like."

"But what if he's Olegaria's grandson?"

"That's not likely. It'd be too much of a coincidence. Olegaria's grandson probably doesn't have enough education to be an officer. He probably can't read or write."

"But that's not really it. It's much, much more than that poor dead mutilated officer. Basically it's the same old story: the obscene and the macabre. Maybe this mutilation's a ritual that dates from prehistoric times and has been perpetuated throughout history. Melo mentions cases of it during the seventeenth-century Catalan uprising. You can also see it in several of Goya's etchings of the guerrilla war against Napoleon. How does this ritual pass from one war to the next, when they're sometimes hundreds of years apart and the men who perform it have no notion of history? It must come from our instincts. So what instincts do we have? God Almighty, what are our instincts? You're right: the best thing is to forget about it. And after all . . . after all, that second lieutenant was asking for it! Who forced him to stand on that parapet, the dumb son of a bitch? Couldn't he see he was going to get hurt? There are other things that give me a knot in my stomach. It's not that second lieutenant. I'm a second lieutenant too, and sooner or later I'll die too. He would have killed me if I hadn't killed him; so we're even. Requiescat in pace. The hell with him."

Cruells's lips moved almost imperceptibly.

"Don't start praying now. Don't be an asshole. You'll have plenty of time later. Now listen to me."

X And I blurted out the whole story ~~between~~St me and Olivela, without hiding anything.

"So you can see what I've come to. I don't care much about the forgery, to tell the truth. It's poor Trini I keep thinking of, so resigned .

... I left her all alone to fend for herself and led my life as though she didn't exist. My life, or whose? It's true that we have modern ideas, that the idea of not getting married in a religious or civil ceremony came from both of us, and maybe even more from her, since her family's anarchists. Modern ideas ... if I told you ... Is that any reason to leave a woman all alone and not give a damn what becomes of her? Is that what modern ideas amount to? I told Olivella that for her I'd be willing to leave Trini . . ."

"To leave Trini? You wouldn't really have done that, would you?"

"At the moment ... Later, of course, I would have hated myself for it, but at that moment I didn't know what I was saying. You, of course, have never been in a situation like this. It's hard for you to understand. If you don't exaggerate a little you can't get them to love you. Falling in love isn't about halfway measures; it's either sublime madness or ... They have an extremely subtle sense of these things. If you're not going to play for keeps, then don't play at all! They're ~~tremendous~~ ^{awesome}, Cruells; much better than we are. Ask them to risk everything, life and death, peace and quiet, and they'll follow you to the ends of the earth. They're ~~tremendous~~ ^{awesome}, Cruells! It's not strange that women attract us so much when they're a thousand times better than we are!"

"You talk as if this weren't your first adventure."

"My first? Cruells, you're forgetting that I'm not a seminarian. My first? God Almighty, if we went further back ... we'd never end! Besides, so much time's gone by that I wouldn't even remember some of them. That's before the war, old hat! I repented before it was too late; please, let's not talk about stuff that's over and done with. Out of all those women, there's only one I think about sometimes. I got myself into a jam ... and what a jam, God Almighty! Trini never suspected, of course."

Maybe the worst thing is once you've gotten into a situation where there's no way out, you can't tell the one person you could really open your heart to and also take a load off your conscience: your own wife. You have to keep it bottled up inside. At that time it wouldn't have occurred to me to confess like I'm doing now. I went through a rough period, believe me. She was divorced, with a couple of kids she had to support by herself because her husband had skipped town. She'd had the bright idea of marrying a South American, who vanished without a trace when she got pregnant the second time. To support herself and the kids she played bit parts in music halls on the Carrer Nou and lived in a rooming house on Carme Street. Dark-skinned, a real knockout, with black hair down to her waist and eyes right out of The Arabian Nights, but what a moron . . .

God, was she stupid! She read trashy novels and listened to soap operas on the radio. She acted like they were God's own truth and quoted whole lines from the dialogues. I don't know how I stood it! I remember one time she told me, 'Love is masculine, but passion is feminine' (she always delivered ^{this} ~~these~~ lines in Castilian). Because she considered herself passionate, and maybe she was. The problem was, she was passionate with so many guys. If I told you some of the sordid situations I got myself into, what I had to put up with because I couldn't find the strength to break off with that idiot! I was hooked, like other people are on cocaine, and it lasted for months and months. I felt sullied, destroyed, as though I'd fallen in a well and couldn't climb out by myself. Who could lend me a hand? The only person who could have helped me at the time was Trini, and she was the last person I could tell what was happening. I spent a few months in hell, completely out of touch with Trini and with the whole world, as though they'd walled me up in a dungeon. Sensual women disgust me, they've always disgusted me, and this one was no exception. How can

you explain that mystery: that you could be so hooked on a woman who also revolts you? And even so, she was a thousand times better than me, a thousand times more generous and giving. Anyway, why should we talk about her now? It's all like a dream. I can't imagine anymore how that dope could rule my life like she did for four or five months . . ."

"Poor Lluís," was Cruells's only comment.

"But none of them got to me like Olivela! None! Of course, it was because Olivela . . . because Olivela turned me down; that must be the reason. What a mighty fortress! If you could have seen me making a fool of myself . . . It's another diabolical trick of passion that what we ache for most is precisely what we can't get! Olivela's not a thousand times but a million times better than me, even if what Soleràs suspects is true. It's just a hypothesis, you know? And after all, Enrique was a perfect scoundrel. ~~At~~⁵ the most despicable type of scoundrel: a craven scoundrel. Naturally, she looked out for herself and took advantage of my stupidity to assure her children's future. She even gave me some good advice. Would you believe it? I doubt that any man ever found himself in such a ridiculous situation! 'Marry Trini and forget about this useless nonsense.' That's advice, isn't it? Sensible advice; no one can argue about that . . . the only problem was that--how shall I put it--I wasn't looking for advice but . . . aw, the hell with it! I really made a fool of myself that time! Now don't go blabbing about forgeries, saying your conscience won't let you keep quiet! You'll screw up the lives of two kids who never did anything wrong."

"Poor Trini," he muttered. "Are you two planning to get married soon?"

"Get married? But how? In a church? We're both atheists. In a government office? Why should we believe in the state more than in the

Church?"

Cruells gazed at me very seriously through his spectacles, silently agreeing with what I'd said. His telescope lay forgotten on the rock beside us. He glanced at his watch.

"I'd better get going. Doctor Puig is waiting for me at headquarters. It's a two-hour hike. You're righter than you realize. If marriage isn't a sacrament, what is it? Otherwise night will fall before I get there."

X "I don't want to hear any sermons. Sermons are depressing. They're like the mess they feed us, the same for everyone, when everyone feels that his problems are unique. Don't be like Father Gallifa, who ruined everything with his sermons when the look on his face already said it all. What do we mean when we say 'sacrament'? I know it has to do with the ceremony; you don't have to tell me. I got as good a grade as anybody in canon law and I know Adam and Eve didn't go through any ceremony. They just went right ahead. But how can you tell when it's a sacrament? How can you tell when a man and a woman are each other's Adam and Eve? Wait; listen to me. It's going to be a while before night falls. Let's take Enrique as an example. Enrique! There's someone who had no sense of shame! Did you know he wanted to sell his castle and estates to set up a sock factory? Not to run it himself, naturally. He'd found a partner from Reus who promised him a fortune if he'd invest twenty thousand pessetes. 'There's no business like socks,' he apparently told him. 'Every day they wear out quicker. The more of a hurry people are in, the more their feet sweat.' But let's forget about socks and get back to marriage. If Enrique had married someone else with a full ceremony, which of the two, in God's eyes, would have been his Eve?"

"God knows; that's not for us to decide. But as for you, your Eve is Trini. You know that as well as I do. You know what that funny feeling is

in your stomach? It's God's claw. What a great poet Baudelaire was!"

I wanted to shout after him, "Come back! Explain to me about God's claw!" but he hurried off down the path and soon was hidden by the kermes oak and savin.

Falguera de los Cabezos, October 10

X
X
X
If the wind is blowing right, we sometimes hear snatches of chiming churchbells from some village or other . . . in enemy territory, of course, since there's not a single churchbell left in ours. But what a comfort they are! I feel happy. I dreamt ^{of} ~~about~~ Trini last night. Would you believe I'd never dreamt ^{of} ~~about~~ her before? It's a pity the dream was so incoherent, but I could see her very clearly. She was smiling at me, and there were tears in her eyes--her eyes, like those of a wise ^{but} ~~and~~ trusting child.

And on this Sunday morning, hearing some village's far-off churchbells, lying beneath a pine tree, enjoying the ripe, mid-October sun, I thought how happy she, I, and our son could be here . . . Why not? With a cow and a few goats, far from everybody. Let them leave us alone for a while! Those anonymous chiming bells sometimes mixed with the bells on the animals, and I kept thinking how lovely everything would be if it were nice and simple.

But so many others have had that thought and so many more will have it . . . Everything so lovely if it were nice and simple . . . We'd have to start by being simple ourselves. We'd have to start by being solid like statues, without all these loathsome complications we cart around inside us without realizing it.

X
The desolate plains around Puebla de Ladrón don't change from season to season except in temperature. They're like ovens in ^{the} ~~the~~ summer and iceboxes in winter. The vegetation looks the same all year round. It's

pleasant to be in this neck of the woods, so different, and to come face to face again with living--or rather dying--nature. To find that the leaves are turning gold or crimson, that autumn is changing everything from the inside, that the woods are suddenly full of wild mushrooms. My orderly gathers a basketful every day, and we eat them grilled. One time he even brought me some wild honeycombs. His face and hands were horribly puffy, but he assured me that he didn't feel a thing. Apparently if you have enough stings they stop hurting. The honey was a little tart but delicious. We have another dessert that's even better: grapes, from abandoned vines in no man's land, that have turned into raisins and are sweet as can be.

The natives are appalled to see us eating wild mushrooms. "That's food for goats," they mutter in disgust--they, who eat revolting garbage like mortajo as though it were a dish fit for a king. You can't get them to drink a glass of milk for love or money. "That's for sick people; it'd upset our stomachs."

Our footsteps in the woods send all the thrushes flying, and those birds with such weird beaks--I think they're called crossbills. High above us, vultures glide toward the plains around Chilte and Puebla de Ladrón, the scene of our recent battles. They surely see no difference between a battlefield and a buitrera. As high as them or higher, we can see storks heading south for the winter. They're the first birds to migrate, winter's shock brigade.

You can see how calm life is after those nightmarish weeks. One thing has stayed with me: I can't fall asleep without reciting a paternoster to Cygnus's cross. "Take up the cross and follow me." Didn't your god say something like that, Ramon? Among all the many gods, the only one who interests me is the one who became a man. Why should the others interest me if we've never interested them? If there is a God, He would have to

become a man. How could He not do so? How could He leave us all alone with our terrible intelligence--our lucidity in the void, an insignificant firefly in the eternal, endless sea of darkness that surrounds us? If this were the case, if we were alone, when we gaze at the night sky, the vision of outer space would make us freeze in terror: an empty space, unimaginably chilly, forever black, the universe's ~~incomprehensible~~ ^{meaningless} backdrop.

Why, then, does the night sky soothe us, keep us company, reassure us? Why? Who keeps us company? Who?

So many things exist without rhyme or reason. Couldn't God exist too?

Falguera de los Cabezos, Monday, October 11

My promotion to lieutenant finally came through. The letter specifies: "with the duties of an artillery captain." Major Rosich visited my hut in person. He was as sozzled as back in the good old days in Olivet. He embraced me, ~~deeply~~ ^{as} moved as if they'd made me commander of the Holy Roman Empire. I pointed out to him that our battalion has no artillery (those 85-caliber mortars belonged to the other brigade, and once the fighting was over they took them back).

"Don't worry about that, Lluís. I'll buy you some!"

For the moment, since the above mentioned artillery doesn't exist, I'm still leading what's left of the fourth company. Every night I make my rounds, and when I've finished, I sit down someplace where no one can see me and search for Cygnus's cross. It's turned into a real obsession! What is a cross? A simple, clever device invented by some ancient genius, a device to prolong one's agony . . . An atrocious thing. "Take up your cross and follow me." Is suffering, then, the only way?

Eheu, fugaces . . .

Olivel de la Virgen, October 15

X I'm back in Olivel, with a 102° fever. A throat infection I picked up ^{there} on ~~Cabezos's~~ ^{around Falguera de los Cabezos. They sent us} icy peaks. They gave us a collective leave to reorganize our battalion in Olivel (only 150 of our 500 men were still alive) while we awaited new recruits. Our return was sad. In rags, our toes sticking out of the cracks in our shoes, lice-eaten, many with scabies--and the day of our arrival was overcast and depressing, dark at midday as though night had fallen. How different it all was from that other day when we first got here.

X X I'm back in my old bed. What a comfort this familiar sagging mattress is! What if that second lieutenant was really him? Don't think about it; don't drive yourself crazy. It's over and done with. The bedroom still smells like ~~bitter~~ ^{of} almonds. Picó, Cruells, the major, and the doctor would sit around my bed and chat, and through my stupor I thought how unknown they'd seemed ~~to me~~ ^{to} when I saw them four months ago in Castel de Olivo. Now we're like family. The doctor gave me some pills. I don't know what was in them, but amazing as it may sound, they brought down my fever. Olegaria also put in her two cents' worth. Without telling the doctor, she brewed herbal teas I had to drink piping hot. She even rubbed my back with a grilled tomato. She wouldn't have been able to sleep without giving me this treatment, which she claims is infallible for throat infections, and after all, what harm can it do? It didn't hurt me to let her rub me down, and it made her happy . . .

Every time she does something for me, she thinks some other old lady is doing the same for her grandson, wherever he may be. Her

grandson . . . Maybe if I talked it over with her I'd find out once and for all whether her grandson was a second lieutenant and was engaged to a girl named Irene. But every time I'm about to raise the subject, I find I can't get the words out. The only thing I've dared to ask discreetly is the date of his last letter, in the hope that it was after our battle.

2X
X
Unfortunately, it's ^{dated 9 9} from a long time before the fighting around Chiltet. They only hear from him once every three or four months, and the route is extremely circuitous. I don't even know where he was at the time, since in the enemy camp they've forbidden soldiers to say where they are-- something we should do too.

One evening, as we were chatting, a soldier came in with marching orders they'd just received from the brigade. It was totally unexpected, since our new recruits still hadn't arrived and the battalion is as undermanned as when they sent us here to rest and reorganize. An urgent order from the division. The enemy had launched a counteroffensive. We had to be on the battlefield by dawn. The division was mustering all its available forces, however ragged they might be. I would stay behind in Olivet, alone with my infected throat.

2X
They didn't seem very cheerful; in fact, quite the opposite. "This time, there won't be a single man left to tell the tale." And to think that those flatfeet . . ." Picó snuck off with my tobacco pouch; the major swiped my raincoat. They thought I didn't notice, but I was watching out of the corner of my eye. What could I say? I didn't need the stuff, and they're convinced that my possessions are "lucky." You couldn't have gotten them to accept poor Gallart's overcoat for anything on earth! I've come through every battle unscathed, and now I've got a magnificent throat infection. So much luck must be due to the virtues of my pouch and raincoat. But when I saw the doctor, after giving me my Pyramidon

X (the brand name of my pills), slipping my pipe into his pocket, I couldn't resist ^{saying} "Tu quoque?"

"Listen, Lluís: you think just because I'm a doctor that I don't have the same neuroses as everyone else?"

Only Cruells had stayed behind, gazing at me silently with those owl-eyes I find so reassuring. He stared at me as though it pained him to leave.

"You'll be all alone in Olivet."

"That's right, Cruells, and to tell you the truth, I'm glad. I'm sick of fighting."

"I'm worried about you. Relapses can be dangerous."

"Are you talking about my infection?"

"You know what I'm talking about."

"You're wrong. I'm cured. All those nights beneath the Cygnus cross. I prayed a lot, Cruells, even if you don't believe me."

"Why shouldn't I believe you?"

"Listen, I even prayed during our battles, but don't laugh at me! When I curled up in a ditch, wrapped in that raincoat the major swiped, trying to sleep while I listened to whistling stray bullets, I stared at that starry cross and prayed. 'I'm a jerk, Lord, a jerk! Uncle Eusebi is a thousand times better than me, and so is Olivela. I'm not so sure about Enrique, but who knows . . . Everyone, everyone's better than me, God. Have mercy on me, even though no one's a bigger jerk.'"

"People don't say the prayers they want to say; they say the prayers they can say," Cruells replied, serious as always.

I miss my battalion. It's the first time I've been alone since I joined it. Today I woke up without a fever and I would have even gone outdoors if it hadn't been so dark and rainy, which is profoundly depressing in a

X
village that's already in a kind of dip. Olegaria looks after me like the apple of her eye: chicken soup, cups of oregano tea with rum and sugar, fresh goat's milk. You can't get it out of her head that her grandson has a throat infection exactly like mine. A throat infection! That poor dead ~~and~~ ⁹ mutilated second lieutenant!

X
From my room, I can hear the village children playing in the main square ~~in spite of~~ ^{despite} the rain. I miss my battalion like one of those little rascals would miss the rest if he were locked in his room. "I'm the lord of the castle; you have to obey me!" I hear one of them shout. I peer through the half-closed shutters. Isn't that Olivela's oldest son, Enrique Junior? . . . When she was pregnant with this snout-nosed kid, they smeared her doors with shit to universal acclaim and with the old ladies' special blessing. Before, the kids wouldn't play with him; now they look up to him. They obey him. And how! If anyone hesitates, he gives him a swift kick--and the others all find it just and proper.

October 16

I went outside today. It's odd Olivela hasn't seen fit to ask how I was doing in all these days. I don't mean she was supposed to visit me, but should could have sent her hired hand. Maybe she's worried about what people would say, or maybe she doesn't care about me anymore. I'm an orange she's squeezed dry.

I went for a walk outside town. The red and yellow leaves on the poplars along the Parral have begun to fall. The river looks much fuller than when I rode along it on Bellota. What's become of her? Has she forgotten me too?

That pinegrove where cicadas sang is now silent and smells of damp earth instead of resin. The cold weather is starting; I could use the

raincoat those idiots swiped from me.

X
Everyone in town is busy with the saffron harvest, which has been very good. The streets are covered with petals, which also float down the Parral. Their perfume, not as intense but similar to roses, wafts from every doorway. ~~The~~ young and old, men and women, sit in low chairs with big baskets on either side of them. They take the blossoms from one, pull out their crimson pistils, toss the pistils in the other basket and throw away the violet flowers. Later they'll toast these pistils, whose dry powder is saffron, worth its weight in gold, Olivell's treasure.

Sitting by the riverside, I watch thousands and thousands of violet petals float by. There are so many that in some places they cover the entire river, creating a very strange effect.

The scent of saffron ends up obsessing you. And--I'm not sure why--it makes me think of her.

After lunch, Olegaria left me alone in the house. She had to irrigate her vegetable plot; otherwise, she'd lose her turn till next week. There's a strict system for sharing the water from the river.

X
This was the chance I'd been waiting for. My room's on the ground floor; hers is upstairs. I snuck into it like a thief. The door was closed but not locked. The stuffiness of a bedroom never aired suddenly hit me like someone's breath in my face. Inside, it was pitch black. Olegaria only opens the shutters on special occasions, like that other time. I could hardly imagine that one day I'd sneak back by myself . . . I groped my way over to the window. If she came in unexpectedly, what would I say? Anything but the truth. Let her think I was going to rob her, anything, I don't care.

I sat down on the bed. She has five mattresses stuffed with wool, as is customary and traditional with double beds in these parts. You sink into

them as into a cloud, because they're unquilted and therefore shapeless.

Olegaria's only visited Barcelona once in her life. She had to see an eye doctor; she'd begun to get cataracts. The thing that most stuck in her memory was the mattress. "Gosh, how can they sleep on something that hard?"

The photos looked down at me from their ^{gilt} ~~gilded~~ frames. That forced smile, that frontal stare, the hair and eyebrows blackened with charcoal . . . altogether, how idiotic! And especially you, you big jerk: who told you to stand on that parapet?

That deep crease on the left side of his mouth, like a precocious sign of liver trouble: didn't the second lieutenant have it too? Bah; after all, everyone looks like everyone else! When two people look alike, one always looks more alike than the other. What does it mean to look alike? What does it mean to have liver trouble? A man who's just been struck, maybe in his liver, by a Mauser bullet fired at thirty paces--it's understandable that he might look as though he had liver trouble. Who among us, in comparable circumstances, wouldn't have a sickly expression on his face?

This bedroom is stuffier than Father Gallifa's cell, which is saying a lot. And these touched-up photos . . . Who can say for sure that they present an accurate likeness? Especially this one, where he's taking his First Communion side by side with his grandmother, I mean his great-aunt, thanks to the miraculous handiwork of a photographer who thus ^{earned} ~~made~~ ^{himself} twenty duros . . . twenty duros! That bastard, fleecing the innocent! And this hideous frame, a gift from that "lady." "A real lady: she was our schoolteacher." What else except complications and unpleasantness can you expect from people like these?

Olivel, the 17th

X It's so cloudy out that instead of going for a walk I ^{entered} ~~went into~~ the tavern. Melitona came and went, swaying her butt as usual. Poor Gallart: how lonely he looked, lying in that field . . . The commissar had a peculiar reaction: in all the days we spent in Olivel the second time around, he never once set foot in the tavern. "It wouldn't be right for me to go without Gallart."

The major's written to me: "Stay in Olivel. These operations have been botched. Wait for us. We'll be back in a few days."

Is there something in Olivel's air that goes to my head? Why do I feel so good here? Autumn's thousand hues, flights of migrating birds, falling leaves, the river's gurgling waters--everything seems to say, "Don't let the best years of your life slip away. You only live once. Your minutes flow toward nothingness like saffron petals on the Parral . . . Your minutes, which could be so wonderful!" I'd trade everything for one instant of glory!

X The day before yesterday was my twenty-sixth birthday. I only remembered it today. A wave of melancholy crept over me, like ^{some} ~~some~~ forgotten music. Like some music that perhaps was marvelous but we didn't realize that when we heard it. And now, when we've forgotten it, we suddenly realize . . . God, what becomes of the years we've lived?

#

This morning, without noticing, unconsciously, I found myself climbing the hill to the castle. Fortunately, I stopped myself in time. Where am I going? Why should I visit her? What would I say?

Olivel, the 18th

I visited the castle.

Her hired hand led me to the attic, which I'd never seen before.

There are eight or nine enormous rooms, divided by continuations of the walls below. The sloping ceilings follow the lines of the roof, which is supported by huge beams. Where did they find such gigantic trunks? They must have been centuries-old walnut trees; walnut trees like some I've seen on my rides along the Parral, seeming to touch the heavens with their crests and hell with their roots.

X Among these enormous beams, not only on the south side but on the north ~~one~~ ^{side} as well, are swallows' nests, nests shaped differently from the ones among the gables. I gather that each type is built by a different species of swallow. But now there are no swallows. Geckos, however, still scurry about. In some of the walls--they were never plastered--you can see hollows that look like they might be owls' nests. The untiled floor creaks and rattles as you walk. There's lots of junk in the corners. An antique dealer would find more than one interesting piece. There are worm-eaten walnut chests, some with Gothic crests; desks with drawers missing; ~~cadira de frax~~ ^{frax chairs} with broken legs; enormous baroque braziers; items I can't even identify. My attention was caught by three paintings leaning against the wall so that I could only see their backs. They're very big and each has holes in the canvas.

She was in the smallest of the rooms facing south. Instead of broken furniture, it had cages with rabbits and hens and a small dovecote. On top of two old crates, there was a reed mat strewn with figs she'd floured and left to dry in the sun.

She was sitting in a ~~low~~ ^{chair} chair, busy with the saffron like everyone else. Her sons, each seated on a stool between two baskets, did the same with intent expressions on their faces. At that moment, a ray of sunlight broke through the clouds and, seeming to shimmer with tiny droplets, came to rest on the youngest one's hair. I'd never realized how blond he is. His

hair sparkled like old gold on an altarpiece.

Without rising or laying aside her work, she asked me to sit down in another chair. Friendly and courteous. Nothing more. I didn't know what to say, so I asked what those three pictures were.

"Enrique's ancestors. The anarchists enjoyed using them for target practice. I brought them up here because I felt they were frowning at me."

"Do you mind if I look at them?"

Three equestrian portraits that, aside from being period pieces--from different periods in each case--have nothing special to recommend them.

Third-rate provincial painting, of a sort that one can truly say gains with the passage of time, since as years go by they darken and the details are harder to make out. I imagine they depict, respectively, the deceased's grandfather, great-grandfather, and great-great-grandfather, to judge from

the differences in costume. All three, very dressed-up and very stiff on their horses, stare straight ahead without the slightest hint of irony, left hands on their pommels and right hands on their bridles. In fact, they have the same rigid, frontal stare as Olegaria's grandson, but whereas the grandson's lack of irony goes with a kind of innocence, the three

equestrian portraits share the same eyes, somewhere between stupid and roguish, that grace the photo of their descendent. Beneath the horses' front hoofs, rearing up spiritedly, there's an aristocratic coat of arms--identical, of course: a silver olive tree on a vert field, if I remember my heraldry right. Olivela's sons haven't a trace of those neighborhood-grocer's eyes. They don't resemble any of these characters in the least--or Enrique either! The perfect motto for that crest would be: "In God we trust; all others pay cash."

"One day you'll have to get them restored. After all, they're your children's ancestors."

"Yes, of course. Don't think I haven't thought of it."

With admirable deftness, she pulled the pistils from the flowers. All around her, the attic's warped floor was covered with petals. The scent seemed to emanate not from the flowers but from her. Bent over her work, she didn't look at me. I gazed at her in silence.

"Maria de Olivet . . ." I mumbled, and then fell silent again. What could I have added? "Ora pro nobis?"

She glanced up. There was that shadowy light in her eyes that I know so well.

"Did you say something?" Her contralto voice sounded utterly casual, without a trace of the tremolo that had so troubled me. Had I dreamt that tremolo? Could that voice ever have trembled?

"Yes, but I don't remember what I was going to say. I think it had to do with ^{these} ~~these~~ saffron flowers. Or maybe with praying mantises. I don't know if you've ever read a book called The Wonders of Instinct: Chapters in the Psychology of Insects, by a Provençal named Fabre. Very interesting. I was charmed by it when I read it years ago; I was fourteen or fifteen ~~years~~ ^{years} old at the time."

"I thought you were talking about our patroness."

"Yes; that too. Why not? We could mix the Virgin up in it, since you're named after her. Maria de Olivet, Olivela . . . what a lot of work for those tiny pistils! And the petals, so fragrant, are thrown away, good for nothing. The river's full of them; it looks purple in the distance."

"They're good for nothing." And again she bent over her work. Her fingers never stopped for a second.

"Yes, of course they're good for nothing. Instincts are ^{wonderful} ~~prodigious~~, but what's the good of them, really? What's the good of life itself if we miss out on the one thing that matters?"

"What are you talking about now?"

"How should I know? There are so many possible hypotheses! So many hypotheses! Some people hypothesize without realizing what they're doing: Santiago, for instance . . ."

2X She looked at me as though she were thinking, "He's gone nuts." (v2u7) Once he'd started hypothesizing, why didn't Soleràs go further? These children, so blond, with such big eyes: their mother's eyes . . . Precautions are so easy to get around, there are so many possible hypotheses. We'd never get to the end of it! If Enrique and Olivela, for example, had been brother and sister without knowing it? Why not? "There must have been some kind of graft. God knows who it was!" But then they'd resemble each other, at least a little bit. The children would have something in common with the deceased, who would have been their uncle.

X It's odd. What most attracted me to her at that moment was that she'd brought those two splendid children into the world. Some obscure instinct stirred within me, perhaps more of the plant than the animal kingdom, to sow life, potent and dominating; to be like one of those walnut trees along the Parral, with mighty roots, sowing a race of gods: Eritis sicut dii, our most secret wish, the uncertain glory for which Adam traded Paradise's certain and peaceful glory. The wonders of instinct, I thought. The female, once she's been fertilized, devours the male, who is now good for nothing. Then she sacrifices herself unto death for a posterity she'll never even know. Everything for posterity! We're nothing; posterity is everything. But what is posterity? A bunch of morons, the same as us. Basically, insects are as stupid as we are.

While Enrique was alive, maybe: then there were precautions that deserved to be flouted. But now . . . now she's free . . . she has no one to deceive . . . what interest would she have . . .

"They're good for nothing," I repeated. "Their only use was to protect these red pistils. Once the pistils have been plucked, what good are the petals?"

"Exactly"--and she kept busy without paying much attention to me.

"Then you understand what I'm saying?"

"No; I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Do you know what a praying mantis is? A remarkable creature in more than one respect."

X
2X
X
"Yes; here they're called beatas. There are lots of them in the fields in the hottest part of summer. Kids say if you get lost all you have to do is ask a mantis. They'll clasp their hands in prayer, and show you ^{the} ~~which~~ way ~~to go~~." *

"It's still nothing more than a hypothesis. Believe me: if we started hypothesizing, we'd never end! What I meant to say was: isn't it a shame to throw away such pretty flowers? It's a good thing to keep the pistils; I'm not arguing about that. But it's cruel to throw away the flowers."

"What could we do with them? They're good for nothing."

X
X
"Good for nothing . . . Like a woman once she's had children. I'm not saying children aren't worthy of every respect; ^{home-grown} children ~~you harvest~~ yourself, that is, as our major would put it. But do we have to give up love, give up glory? Believe me, Olivela: usefulness isn't everything! We don't have to act like insects."

"Which insects?"

"Praying mantises, for example. Of course, I realize you don't know what I'm talking about. The female praying mantis has some habits that--how shall I put it--one can't altogether approve of. And would you believe that in certain moments of exasperation I envy the devoured male? At least he had his moment of glory, however uncertain. A moment, but such

a long one! Envidable! Why should he live any longer? A moment like that is worth all eternity."

"How long it's been since I saw a praying mantis," she said with all the naturalness of a great actress. "When we were young, we used to catch them in the fields. We'd hold their tails between our fingers and say 'Now pray.' And they'd pray. How many years ago that was! . . . We also caught tadpoles in the river. We'd keep them in jars till they turned into frogs."

"There are so many possible hypotheses. In the whole world, Olivela, you're the person who's suggested the most to me. You were talking about tadpoles which, if they don't die first, turn into frogs. That's what they call metamorphosis. But actually, some turn into toads or salamanders, because the world's as full of metamorphoses as it is of hypotheses. As one goes through life, one's constantly bumping into hypotheses. Cagorcio, for instance, poor old Cagorcio . . ."

"Say what you mean. You think I'm going to be offended?"

X "Cagorcio ^{wasn't} ~~was never~~ your father. You can see that at a glance. From a toad's tadpole you get a toad."

"Do you think that's never occurred to me? If I told you how many times it's crossed my mind and how much I'd like it to be true, for my sake and for his. Especially for his. It'd be so much better for him . . ."

"Yes, Olivela, and the other one."

"What other one?"

X "The other brute: the shy, well-bred one. The high-class brute. Don Enrique de Alfoz y Penyarrostra . . . What a fool, what a Roland! If we started hypothesizing we'd never stop. It's enough to make the annals of cuckoldry . . ."

Her eyes flashed fiercely, blindingly.

"We'll never understand each other," she cut me off. "Believe me, I'm sorry. Why is it so hard for you to understand?"

"To understand what?"

"What I'm like. All I care about is my children."

And she went back to her work.

The uncertain ray of sunlight, full of trembling, tearful raindrops, suddenly came to rest on the older one's hair. "I'm the lord of the castle; you have to obey me!" And it also shimmered like old gold. The two of them were intently plucking pistils. And how silent the swallows' nests were!

Olivel, the 19th

An unexpected visitor: Soleràs.

He showed up at Olegaria's house. "She told me you'd been sick. I'm delighted to hear you're feeling better."

I asked him to sit down in the only chair. I was lying in bed.

"You're a lucky son of a bitch! A miraculous throat infection lets you take it easy . . . precisely in the village where your girlfriend lives."

He took off his leather jacket and dropped it on the floor.

"I don't have a girlfriend, here or anywhere else, so please don't start trying to get on my nerves. Do you want a smoke? They swiped my pipe and pouch, but I've got some tobacco and rolling papers."

"I'd rather have some cognac."

The guys in the Baby Bottle Club had left me a bottle of cane liquor, which all of them, including the doctor, claimed was the best cure for sore throats. He poured himself a full cup--my aluminum cup--and then put his feet up on the table, stretched, and yawned.

"You and I should have a chat, Lluís, and not about your girlfriends,

who don't interest me in the least. You know what you can do with them. I'll tell you in all frankness: it's an aspect of life I don't care about one way or the other. After all, when a man and a woman kiss, all they do is join their digestive tracts at the upper end."

"Is that what you call philosophy?"

"Yes, but of a very cheap variety: accessible to the most uncultivated minds--yours, for example."

He laughed that obnoxious cackling laugh of his, and every now and then he took a long drink from the cup.

"Take it easy with that stuff, Juli. It's cane liquor."

X "You and I should talk ^{have a serious} ~~seriously~~, Lluís. Don't you think Macabre Wedding would be a good title for a novel? A superpornographic novel worthy of the age we live in! Would you believe the idea for that monastery wedding came from you . . . from you and Trini? You can't deny that you're a pair of mummies ^{to} ~~for~~ each other!"

"Keep a civil tongue in your head. You're going to make me lose my temper like last time."

"Poor Trini! What you can't forgive is that she's true to you:

X Et lire la secrète horreur du dévouement . . . ^{it}

"Did you come here to sermonize?"

"No, Lluís. I'm not that sublime yet. Don't worry. I came to tell you that you and I will never be notaries. Notaries! Is it possible that we were cramming for that exam? God, how we pored over The Digest, and those volumes of decrees! What a waste of time! Not to mention The Pandects! Ugh! We've tasted glory, which leaves an aftertaste that makes you hate decrees, The Digest, The Pandects, and even Papinian's Quaestiones et Responsa. We've been knight-errants, we've done this and that, we've been free, we've been men, we've been cruel in battle . . . but any jerk can be

X a notary! War's a slut who poisons your blood forever; everything else pales by comparison. Tell me something: why do we still read The Divine Comedy? . . . assuming, of course, that we do read it. After Roland Cuckolded, it's the book I've enjoyed most. Why? Because in three thousand years of literature, there's only been one Divine Comedy. How much filth, on the other hand, has been secreted, what oceans of monotony! Now, if one is written every three thousand years, that would make three thousand Divine Comedies three thousand times three thousand years from now. However little algebra and trigonometry you know, you can figure out the result. And time flies. It seems like only yesterday that diplodoci and megatheria walked ~~upon~~ ² the earth . . . Two hundred million centuries have passed in a flash! So poor Dante, without knowing what hit him, will end up in some corner of an enormous attic full of books as good as his that no one will read, because who could read the works of all those millions of geniuses? Human memory won't be able to hold the names of the thirty or thirty-five million Dantes who'll accumulate if this planet, so remarkable in more than one respect, lasts the normal length of time instead of blowing up--which is by no means impossible. And that's why I've decided not to write Macabre Wedding and why I've abandoned the idea of becoming a second Dante."

"Very interesting, but I can't understand why you came to Olivell just to tell me this piece of news. Perhaps you have something in common with Dante, but I certainly don't."

"You may not have aspired to be another Dante, but you did aspire to be a notary. Well, for every Dante there have been approximately six hundred billion notaries."

"I can see you've counted them up carefully."

"I did it one night when I had insomnia. If you ever have trouble

sleeping, do as I did: count all the notaries there are, ever have been, and ever will be on this planet. You'll fall asleep more quickly counting notaries than counting sheep. What a multitude of notaries! You could more easily count the stars in the sky or the grains of sand beneath the ocean! I've always suspected that Abraham missed his métier. He should have been a notary. What a great notary Abraham would have been! Read all that stuff about how he bought the cave of Machpelah where he wanted to bury his wife. Read it and you'll see that he bought it for four hundred silver shekels (Genesis, chapter xxiii, verses 7 through 20) and in passing you'll see that no one could whip up a better deed of sale. What a great notary! Believe me, Lluís."

"So what?"

"Believe me, Lluís: the substitutes man seeks for the one true glory are false and ludicrous. Literary glory? Nothing but paper . . . To be a book among millions of books, a mummy among millions of mummies, a bust on a filing cabinet in the offices of 'Son of Ruscalleda. Soup Noodles . . .'"

"And what would true glory be?"

"War and love, killing and its opposite! There is no other. But ever since my tenderest youth, I've had such dreadful tooth trouble . . ."

2x "War and love, killing and its opposite . . . You don't think you're the first person to say that, do you? Once was enough. Stuff like that gets boring when you ^{we} already ^{he and} know it."

"Of course it gets boring. Glory gets boring; we can only stand it for an instant. But what an instant! We all live for that instant . . . Marriage? Who wants to hear about marriage? In fact, that's what I came to tell you: that you can count me out! I don't want to hear about marriage! Marriage is their favorite sacrament, poor dears! Far, far more than

X baptism! But leave me out of it! I wanted a great love. Who doesn't aspire to be the ~~protagonist~~ ^{lead} of a great love? A great love--that is, one that has nothing to do with marriage. Not even as a joke, and you see, that's what I came to tell you."

"To tell me? But I'm sure you realize that . . . What are you telling me for?"

X "It's strange that you can't seem to get the point. If I kept on with you, I'd find myself married and with children before I knew what ~~had~~ ^g hit me. That's not for me! That's not for me at all! Don't try to drag me into that! I wouldn't mind a great love, which is always interesting, but don't talk to me about marriage! And even less if I'm going to get saddled with someone else's children . . . oof, that's all I need. Children, as our major always says, have to be ~~ones you harvest yourself~~ ^{home-grown.} War and love, killing and its opposite: that's all right, but only if it lasts an instant. And come to think of it, do you realize I've never killed anyone?"

"Picó told me you fought like a tiger."

"With that machine gun? That's not killing. It's more like target practice. I mean killing, personally, for personal reasons, someone you've got it in for. Your best friend, for example. To kill him with the same voluptuousness with which . . . because they're both the same."

"Bah! I repeat: if you think you're the first one to discover . . ."

"I haven't discovered anything. You get me? And I couldn't care less . . ."

"I'm glad."

"To discover something would be a success, and only idiots succeed, those incapable of attempting something hopeless. That's exactly what I came to tell you: the only loves that interest me are hopeless loves. The hell with marriage! Our only hope is hopelessness. Make a note of that:

maybe it should be my motto. I'd like so much to kill! Not with a machine gun; with my bare hands. To grip a throbbing neck till I strangled someone. I've got biceps, you know? I've got muscles and sinews! You don't believe me; you've never believed me. You've never thought I was worth being scared of. But I can kill! But only with my bare hands. You've always thought I was a weakling. You're ~~an idiot~~ ^{a fool}, just like that lieutenant colonel . . ."

"What lieutenant colonel?"

"The one at my physical, who wanted to reject me because my chest was too narrow . . ."

"You always said it was because you were nearsighted."

"Bunch of idiots! You don't know there are two kinds of muscles: visible and invisible. That foreigner, for example: so tall and broad-shouldered, with a chest like a horse! A stunning specimen! But if I'd wanted to, I could have KO'd him in a second. There are smooth, invisible muscles . . ."--and Soleràs rolled up his sleeve and showed me his long, skinny, shapeless arm. "With one punch, I could have . . ."

"Poor Juli, you've always had this obsession. You know any punk could knock you silly. Forget about those invisible muscles, which only exist in your imagination. You have much finer qualities. I can't understand why you worry so much about your muscles. You wouldn't trade places, I assume, with a stevedore."

"Of course I would"--and he stared at me in surprise. "Why shouldn't I change places with him? Maybe that foreigner worked on a dock! So blond and tan. How do you know he wasn't a dock worker in Oslo? With those magnificent teeth only savages have . . . You can't imagine how much trouble my teeth have always given me! An eccentric Swedish heiress. She was much older than him, one of those ripe, well-preserved

Nordic types. He looked to be about twenty; she could have been fifty. A magnificent couple! There'll always be a couple like that with a motorboat who think they've discovered a completely deserted cove: a cove where they can kick up their heels like a pair of horses. And always, always, there'll be a twelve-year-old kid hiding in the fennel who'll throw up from watching them . . . Because don't delude yourself: there's no such thing as a deserted cove. Everything we do in secret is watched by innocent, unforgiving eyes. Me, nearsighted? Don't make me laugh! There's nothing I'd like better! Not to see farther than my nose . . . like all of you. You think it's fun seeing the inside of everything? For example--I'll give you an example that'll help you understand. Olivela is a hell of a broad, like that Swede. When you, Lluís, stare at Olivela . . ."

"Knock it off!"

"Wait: it's just an example. When you look at her, what do you see? Her eyes, her hair, her mouth. Your gaze doesn't pierce the surface. If it were like Roentgen's rays, what would you see? Her brain, her nerves, her larynx, her lungs."

"If that were the case, no woman would attract us."

"Who knows? There are some gorgeous lungs! Olivela's, for instance, or that Swede's. And the livers those women have! What terrific livers! And exquisite shade of purple, marvelously iridescent . . . What a pity I'm not a painter! I'd paint a vision--my vision--of Olivela or that Swede that'd knock you off your feet. What a pair of broads! Bursting with good health! What terrific endocrine glands: that's what makes them so womanly! I, on the other hand, I'm sorry to say, have to modestly acknowledge that my endocrine glands . . ."

"Stop jabbering about glands. You're talking nonsense."

"Nonsense? They rolled around in the sand, whinnying like a couple

of horses . . . and I threw up. I would have liked to strangle that cretin and all the cretins on earth!"

He stopped, fixed me with his nearsighted gaze, and snickered.

"I don't envy you those dames, Lluís. I assure you I don't envy you! My ambition was far loftier. But here's the problem: it's fine to repent after you've sinned. That way you kill two birds with one stone: first sinning and then repenting. Repenting is just another way of making it last longer . . . and a sin lasts such a short time! On the other hand, to repent ^{or} for not having sinned is a sterile emotion that gives no satisfaction. Blessed the man who can weep abundantly for his abundant sins! It's like rain watering soil well fertilized with dung; it makes for a splendid harvest! I'm just the opposite: what barren soil, and what a persistent draught! You refuse to believe my aunt saw visions of Saint Philomena, just as you refuse to believe it was I who stole those cans of condensed milk from the commissary. Eppur si muove. You'll realize it soon enough. You won't have to wait long, In fact, as soon as I leave this room . . . I'm talking about those cans of milk, not Saint Philomena. As far as the latter is concerned, you'll just have to take my word for it. My aunt's strong as an ox, which she attributes partly to the healthy life she leads but mostly to Saint Philomena's special protection. As far as her way of life is concerned, I'll tell you about it later. Right now we're discussing Saint Philomena. Well, once my aunt had the flu: a flu like yours, with a fever. Since she'd never been sick before, that flu with a 102-degree fever was a major event in her life. We could even say it was a milestone, since apart from that flu, very few things worthy of mention have happened to her. Well now, one feverish, sleepless night, Saint Philomena appeared to her and said: No temas, yo te salvaré. Why did Saint Philomena promise to save her in Castilian? How should I know? Ask my aunt. I suppose it must

2X be because at the time--during ^{Primo de Rivera's} ~~the~~ dictatorship--Catalan ~~still~~ didn't have official status."

"That'd really be something, if even the saints in Heaven . . ."

"And let me point out that there's no love lost between my aunt and Spain. On the contrary, she's always had a soft spot for the Carlists and their holy traditions. But do you think I came here specially to talk about my aunt? If we started talking about Primo de Rivera and the 1920s, we could reminisce for years! It was during the dictatorship that you and I met, when we were about to graduate from high school. In 1929 we entered college together. And it was in December 1930, if my memory serves me, that we struck that momentous blow for freedom. You remember? Trini was with us; you'd just started going out with her. We climbed onto the university roof to hoist that flag: the federalist republican flag! How many arguments we'd had about which flag to hoist! Some wanted it to be black, others red, others red and black, others republican (with the peculiarity that, at the time, no one knew what the republican flag looked like). It's curious that the simplest idea, of hoisting the Catalan flag--which we all recognized and which would have represented us all--never crossed our minds.

"When we put it to a vote, the federal flag won. More problems: what did the federal flag look like? We had to ask Trini's father, and it was Trini who, following his descriptions, threw one together with some scraps of cloth. There were red, yellow, and purple stipes and a dark-blue triangle with white stars. We cut the stars from a sheet of thick white paper and pasted them on. What a nuisance that damned flag was! Those stars gave rise to new arguments. How many were there supposed to be? One for every federated state, but who knew how many federated states there would be? To be on the safe side, we stuck a lot on: fifteen or

sixteen, to make everyone happy! Then came the practical problem of sneaking it in. I tied it around my waist like a sash underneath my overcoat, and did it ever bulge! It was the only time in my life anyone ever thought I was fat! And finally . . . to get it up there! Oof! Do you remember how we crawled across those rooftiles that kept slipping beneath us: first you, and then Trini and me? So many arguments, so much work, so much effort, so much crawling over the university roof--all so that people walking through the square below could scratch their heads and ask, 'What are those students up to now? Why are they hoisting the United States flag?'"

"Is that what they said? I never realized that!"

"Poor Lluís: you're always in a daze. What did you expect them to say? What's the use of hoisting a flag even its own mother wouldn't recognize?"

"What I do remember clearly is that you'd found a can of gasoline somewhere and were determined to set fire to the library. It was I who stopped you."

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"You've always been in favor of learning. Do you really think it would have been a great loss if the whole library had gone up in smoke? But there's another point that troubles me and that I'd be sorry not to share with you before we part forever. Forever: there's a word that rolls off ~~your~~ ^{over} tongue. The point that troubles me is the following: are we the same throughout our lives? Do you feel you have anything in common with the six-year-old you were twenty years ago? When you're eighty--and the day will come--will you feel you have anything in common with the Lluís you are now? And if not, what are we? Think it over; make an effort. A stone is always the same, its substance unchanging through centuries and millenia, but we . . . till eternity transforms us into ourselves . . . our

cells are constantly being replaced. We lose old ones and gain new ones. At our age, we probably don't have one left from when we were suckling babes. Are we nothing but forms, and changing ones at that, while matter flows into and out of us like water in a river? A form matter sets up housekeeping in, like those rats in the donkey. In that case, the great law of the universe would be: 'Maintain appearances! Nothing else matters!' And this incorporeal form, the only thing that exists: tell me who establishes it! The space that surrounds and delimits us? No. Poor space; it has other fish to fry! Time? The same story! Space and time: what a pair! I assure you that if you start worrying about it, you'll get a headache. There's no easy answer. I'd like to know what son of a bitch determined my form and made me look like a puny, nearsighted, introverted schizophrenic. You think it's fun looking like me? You, of course . . . Hold your horses; don't interrupt! You think I enjoy keeping track of your chickpeas? I've made up my mind; you'll hear all about it. I'm fed up with chickpeas and confidences! I'm sick of all of you: of you, of Trini . . ."

"Of Trini?"

"Yes: of Trini. Why are you looking at me like that? Your wife is a very special person, Lluís. If anything should happen to me, she'll think it's because of her."

"You're losing your mind. What do you think is going to happen to you? And what does Trini have to do with it?"

"I knew you were slow on the uptake, but not to this extent . . . Don't you know that women still read the Romantics: Schiller and that other guy, Goethe? Goethe: what a jerk! Take my word for it, Lluís: instead of reading Elective Affinities, read the article under 'Bicycle' in the Espasa Encyclopedia, which explains it much more clearly: 'The reader should bear in mind that these modern vehicles are appropriate for one

X person or even two, but by no means three, which ^{can cause accidents} ~~are dangerous~~."

"I've never had the slightest interest in bicycles."

"Some women . . . And now I'm not referring to your wife--God forbid--or even to Olivella. You never visited my house; you can't even imagine someone like my aunt. You wouldn't have been able to appreciate that stench at its full value: that stench of a hidden and unique existence. I lived with it for many years: endless years, maybe three or four centuries. Because believe me: it's not easy to date an aunt like mine. In general, other aunts are from the seventeenth century, well before the French Revolution, but mine is way ahead of her time and talks about the French Revolution as though it had already taken place. She speaks of Marie Antoinette as of a sister-in-law whom one basically despises but who nonetheless remains part of the family. At other times, however, she plunges into the darkness of a nebulous past, returning to prehistoric eras that are hard to date ^{precisely} ~~exactly~~. At such moments, you could talk to her--not about Marie Antoinette but about Tutankhamen--and she'd stare at you in amazement like some caveman incapable of suspecting that he was the dawn of humanity! What a dawn, my God, what a dawn, and what a humanity! In any case, the stench in her apartment, to be precise, is ^{pure} ~~from~~ 1699. Not a year more or less! You, because your uncle owns a noodle factory, think you're the misunderstood nephew par excellence. Don't kid yourself. You could get a kick out of mailing him Blast. I had no such luck . . . Don't think I didn't try . . . Don't be naive; all nephews have had the same idea. The problem is: we don't all have the same aunt. She'd seat herself in her Louis Philippe armchair, don her spectacles, and . . . absolute serenity! Only after receiving Blast every week for many months did she deign to comment, 'I can't imagine who sends me this strange magazine where they're always talking about someone named Bakunin. It

must be from the Fathers of the Oratory."

"It's true: there are some really extraordinary aunts . . ."

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"If you only knew. One year when by chance three boys we knew got married within the space of a few months, my aunt concluded, 'It seems to ^{me} ~~me~~ that more boys than girls are getting married.' And another time, discussing some of our eccentric relatives, ^{she said always} 'People ^{do} the opposite of what everyone does.' I've got a ton of them! If I got started, I'd never stop! I could tell you so many stories about that apartment . . . A cramped apartment on Upper Sant Pere Street. The windows are kept shut all year, with the shutters and curtains drawn, because my aunt suffers from agoraphobia and heliophobia. Let it suffice to say that in Godella, where we always spent the summers, she never left her room, which she kept in darkness, and needless to say she never set foot on the beach. The only thing that ever interested her, I mean from the outside world, was that cave with the stalactites. Sometimes I think it's odd that stalactites didn't grow in her apartment in Barcelona. An apartment like that--how can I put it--suits me to a T. You feel like Tutankhamen, you know, like a mummified pharaoh reposing calmly in his crypt--in a word, like a fish in water. I lived there for endless years, for centuries. I can speak from experience. My aunt can't abide electricity (for example, she's never set foot on a streetcar), so her apartment is still lit by gas. A certain odor of gas, very 1899, mixes with the 1699 molecules, lending them a special piquancy: the cancan plus Jansenism. As for the walls . . . the walls don't exist! Completely covered with pictures; abominable pictures, of course: saints of both sexes, souls in Purgatory, deaths of the just and unjust; there's even one with all the monarchs of Europe. Before the Great War, ^{naturally} ~~of course~~, There's a terrifying spread of kings surrounding--as though he were the whole gang's patriarch--poor old Franz Josef with his phenomenal

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sideburns. And then there are family portraits, lots of family portraits: the ugly, repulsive faces of people to whom I apparently owe my existence. My aunt sleeps in a windowless inner room, typical of such apartments. The only air comes through the door, which opens directly onto the entrance hall, which is extremely cramped, about four feet by six. Pay close attention to this detail, which has considerable importance. My aunt sleeps six feet from the front door, since the head of her bed's right up against the wall between the entrance hall and her room. This means it's not easy to open the front door at night without her noticing. She's got very sharp ears and is a very light sleeper, like all rich, eccentric old ladies. Well, I managed it. As you see me now, I left and came back after midnight without her noticing. She wouldn't let me out at night. Only when I was in the army did she finally give me permission. I'm grateful to her for that: sneaking out at night wouldn't have been any fun if it hadn't been a forbidden fruit. The joys of hypocrisy, but don't misunderstand me: of total hypocrisy. Some people are hypocrites of virtue, but sincere in their vices. What's hard is to be a hypocrite all the time, to live a double life. Maybe it's difficult for you to understand, but basically it's very simple. . . I slept at the other end of the apartment. I'd tiptoe down the hall in my stocking feet in pitch darkness, counting my steps to know where I was and keep from bumping into the furniture. With the utmost care, I'd open the front door. And I'd set out, at one or two in the morning, for the Barri Xino. Why the Barri Xino, you ask. Isn't that awfully corny, going to the red-light district? It certainly is. It's as corny as you can get! As corny as class struggle and the liberation of the proletariat! That's what attracted me. There I pretended to enjoy vice when deep down I'm as devout as they come. In fact, sometimes I've even thought of becoming
Father of the Oratory
a priest. I can see from your face that you can't make head or tail of what

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I'm saying. What can I do? It's so simple. You'll just have to wait and hope that someday you'll see the light.

"If I could make you understand the subtle pleasures of phantasmagoria! To be and not to be (poor Shakespeare); to be oneself and another: to be and not exist, to exist and not be all at the same time! A split personality, total escape, a dizzying sensation you can only get from a double life! I won't describe that den of iniquity, which was like all the others: sordid, smelly, and dank, frequented by a few whores, always the same ones. Morphine addicts in their fifties. On the wall, naturally, there was a print of the Virgin of Lourdes. All those dens are alike. Once in a while a homosexual would drop by and liven things up a bit, not much. if it hadn't been for that print stuck to the wall with thumbtacks, you might have taken it for some corner of hell. In fact, it was like a bargain-rate hell: a hell everyone could afford. They served the foulest rotgut you can imagine, probably made from wood alcohol; you could buy morphine and cocaine at reasonable prices; and fabulous obscenities were uttered in the most casual tones. At the time, you refused to believe I frequented places of this sort. You always suspected that all I did on the sly was drink lime-flower tea, at most adding a few drops of anisette. Eppur si muove, you know? When I was sixteen, I was already getting tired of it. Now you'll hear what I really enjoyed about all that. I was coming home sometime between five and six in the morning, drunk as a lord and with a tremendous need to . . . I held it back, because that was the best thing about it. There's nothing like holding back an urge: an urge to do anything, to hold it back! When I was a kid, I used to hold back from drinking because water tastes so wonderful when you're really thirsty. Maybe pleasure's just the other side of pain. Maybe the ultimate pleasure is nothing more than intense pain mysteriously inverted. But let's go back

X to what I was telling you. As the night watchman opened the door to my building, I ~~needed to so badly that I~~ almost did it in my pants. He gave me a lit candle, as was still the custom in that kind of neighborhood, and closed the door, leaving me inside, like a gravedigger who seals a niche once the corpse is inside. Then I, the corpse, climbed the stairs with the candle in my hand and that terrible need, which was reaching its critical phase, its unbearable phase. You see, I'd drunk lots of brandy, lots. I reached the second-floor landing in an extreme state of tension, about to burst. I never told you that my aunt rents the second floor (since the building is hers) to a highly respectable family: a notary, you know, nothing more or less. And the notary has a daughter, who at that time was almost fourteen: fresh as a daisy, an angelic creature. With two black braids and light-brown eyes, tall and slender as Desdemona. Nati would have looked like a cockroach beside her--you remember Nati, the daughter of the peasants who worked my aunt's farm? Where's that tobacco you said you had?"

After rolling a cigarette, he continued his monologue, "Both my aunt and the notary had gotten it into their heads that it'd be a great idea for us to marry--when we were old enough, of course. First I'd have to get my degree. Then I'd become the notary's assistant while I was studying for the exam, and once I'd passed it . . . straight to the altar! But listen: didn't I tell you we'd never be notaries? It was a terrific idea, except they hadn't taken me into account. I reached the door, still holding that candle, and with my other hand I unbuttoned my fly. I stood there for a few minutes like someone carefully aiming a pistol, holding back my urge in a final, supreme effort to prove my willpower because, as Carnegie said, willpower is the key to success. What? You're surprised that I've read Carnegie? I've read everything, absolutely everything! Including Bossuet's

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Funeral Sermons! Even though, if you want to know my true opinion, there's something even more tedious, which is Marx's Das Kapital. I'm sure I'm the only person in the world who's read it from cover to cover. And in the original German! Hey, don't think I'm trying to show off . . . Marxists . . . hmm . . . They're nothing more than Hegelians, left-wing Hegelians. That is, they took all the imagination out of Hegel. Don't trust anyone without imagination. Believe me; I've warned you before. They're frightening! Without imagination, there's no sense of humor. In the same manner that they'd behead half the human race to make Das Kapital required reading in nursery schools, they're capable of the most punctilious scholarship. It's a real pity you've never believed my prophesies, Lluís. A real pity! Up until now, professors had to spout Krause's theories if they wanted tenure. Well, I prophesy that a day will come when all pedants will be Marxists! But what were we talking about? About Carnegie? About willpower? That's it: willpower! I was telling you how I exercised my willpower in front of the door to that notary's apartment. When I'd proved to myself how much willpower I had, I released a regular flood, aiming at the crack beneath the door so it would seep into the entrance hall. I'd have liked to have enough reserves to flood the entire apartment, including the bedroom where that vision of innocence was dreaming of consecrated wafers and angelfood cakes. To flood every notary's office on earth! That's what I'd like. But I was drained, terribly drained; what a feeling of impotence! . . . And I continued ^{up} on to our apartment, which is 5B, weighed down by an infinite sadness, an immense sense of failure, a melancholy that afflicted me. I was sixteen, the age when you have those kinds of feelings."

He sighed deeply and solemnly, as though what he'd just recounted were really the story of some hopeless adolescent love. I was so astounded

by this delirious outpouring of gibberish that I couldn't think of anything to say.

"After all that, you'll understand my response to any possibility of marriage, however remote. I've pissed on marriage ever since the tender age of sixteen! That's the last thing I need! No, no; count me out! One night, after returning from one of my expeditions to the Barri Xino, after I'd gotten into bed, I beheld a luminous vision. It wasn't very big, not even two feet tall, and the light emanating from it was very feeble, barely visible. It was like a nun dressed in a white habit, but without three-dimensionality, disembodied. 'Saint Philomena,' I thought in terror. I already told you there's no electricity in our apartment. I'd have had to get out of bed to light the gas, but I was too scared to move. I pulled the covers over my head, but I couldn't get to sleep. Finally dawn came. I stuck my head out and looked. Tacked to the wall, there was a print--of Saint Philomena, of course. A print that glowed in the dark. ~~As~~ something my aunt had bought. She'd discovered my nocturnal jaunts and thought that luminous print would be an edifying device. She didn't say a word--then or anytime after. She'd said everything she had to say with that picture of Saint Philomena. The next day the print was gone. She'd taken it back to her bedroom. Without mentioning it or explaining. But one day, as we were sitting around after lunch, she said, 'The notary and his family on the second floor . . . are so upset by what happened. They can't understand it . . . ~~maybe~~ ^{perhaps} in the future you could refrain . . .'"

He poured himself a last cup of cane liquor.

"I've come to say goodbye, Lluís."

"You're transferring to another brigade?"

"Not exactly."

"You're not going to join the flatfeet, are you?"

"Don't tell me you believe that nonsense too."

"No. I saw them in action. The same as us; no better or worse. They had as many casualties or more. The division's sent you somewhere else?"

"Maybe . . . And I wanted to give you these letters. I'd been saving them till now . . . like a fool. I'm a fool too; much more of a fool than you are, when I really set my mind to it. Except I hide it as much as I can. I don't want to keep them anymore. Take them. But don't look at them right now. You'll have plenty of time when I'm gone . . . I'm leaving before I make more of a fool of myself. Goodbye."

Olivet, 20th

Ramon, I wish you were here . . . and that I could cry for hours and hours! These letters from my wife to Soleràs . . . How could I have suspected? I left her so alone . . . I read them with a dreadful curiosity. This is worse than any battle I've been in.

PART TWO

Le malheur est ridicule.

Simone Weil

December 26, 1936

Dear Juli,

X What a sad Christmas, yesterday . . . All alone with the kid, who kept whining and asking for his father. Today it's exactly five months since he left. "Don't you know daddy's in the war?" "Well, then I want to go too!" Lluís and his son are so alike that sometimes it makes me laugh. Their gestures, the way they curl up in bed . . . If you knew how alone I feel . . . The main reason I write to you is ~~to get you to write back so~~ ^{so you'll} ~~your letters can keep me company.~~ He almost never writes!

X Yesterday we had Christmas nougats and champagne. At least there's plenty of both in Barcelona, no doubt because all the nougat and champagne factories are in ~~Republican~~ territory. I made a big effort to be as cheerful as possible for the kid's sake, but my thoughts kept going back to July 26th, when Lluís left. The raindrops from a summer shower rattled against the train station's tin roof; ~~the~~ ^a strong smell of wet earth mixed with the smell from the steam engines. I felt like crying when he hugged me, because at times like that it feels good to cry, but . . . I know he can't stand tears! Sentimentality, as he puts it, annoys him. 2X Excuse me for getting all this off my chest ~~with you~~ ^{to but}. Who else could I tell it to? If you knew how lonely I feel, how lonely I've come to feel during these interminable five months.

February 2, 1937

When I got home today, I found four letters: two from you and two from Lluís. I felt like hugging everybody. Lluís's letters were full of good news that dissipated all my anxiety. Now I just feel sad that he's so far away, in Madrid . . .

It's a kind of sadness, certainly, but somehow pleasurable because it's

full of memories and hopes. Happy memories of when we were first together. Though he doesn't know it, Lluís has a talent for making people love him, and his son's inherited it. And I'm so glad they have it! It's made me suffer so much not to possess it myself! As far as hopes are concerned, I have so many! His most recent letter is loving. It seems he misses me, that he's starting to realize how much we mean to each other. The miracle will come to pass; I believe in it with blind faith. And you, who are like a brother to us both, deserve a lot of the credit. Don't deny it. I can sense that you're doing everything in your power to influence him, to bring him back to me. Of course you'll never admit it. You're too ~~tactful~~^{modest}. Unfortunately, there aren't many men like you in the world. But we women can sense these things. We know whom to trust.

A small event in our monotonous life. Since the boy was often sick with throat infections (another legacy from his father), I had his tonsils taken out. Lluís never agreed to have his own removed, but I don't want the boy to have sore throats all his life, when they're so easy to prevent. The operation only lasted a moment, but what a painful moment, poor kid! Especially with the second tonsil, because with the first one they took him by surprise. On ~~his~~^{his} guard, he clamped his mouth shut and kicked at the doctor.

Anyway, it's over now, and I'm glad. That's one worry I won't have.

I'm so happy about ~~those~~^{these} letters from Lluís! And about yours too, of course. Thanks for the kind words you wrote, and thank God I don't need them. They arrived at a moment when the world seemed fresh and new!

March 3

Your letters are such a comfort. Why don't you believe me? Especially now, when it's weeks since I've heard from Lluís . . . And I'd

felt so hopeful! His last note was in his old, telegraphic style . . .

If it weren't for your letters, I'd feel so utterly alone! And I'm not like Lluís, who can get along fine all by himself. I feel crushed by solitude.

April 7

It's not that Lluís is sick of me. That's not what I meant at all. Quite the contrary! I know he needs me and that sooner or later he'll realize it. One day he'll realize that everyone needs a hand to hold. One day he'll realize. If I didn't have this hope, how could I keep going?

As I write to you, I'm contemplating that fabulous pile of condensed milk, ~~Farmer brand~~, in the middle of the living room. Yes, I had some fun taking them out of the crates and piling them up in a pyramid. Beside the pyramid of cans stand the five empty crates: in the middle of the living room, where you left them when you unloaded the van. I should store them in the cellar, but I hate the thought of doing it. I feel so good whenever I look at those ~~poor~~ crates.

It was so wonderful to see you appear out of nowhere! After so many months . . . How many? I don't even know! Since the beginning of the war, the beginning of this war, which is starting to feel like the beginning of the world. Almost nine months, but what months! An eternity!

I'm sure if he wanted to he could slip away too. You managed to do it. And he's my husband and Ramonet's father . . . It's true that every month he sends me all his pay. He hardly keeps anything for himself. But why hasn't he tried to visit?

I can imagine what a sacrifice these five crates of condensed milk must represent for you. Though you didn't want to admit it, I'm sure they're your daily rations, saved up for months and months. How handy

they'll be! I didn't know where to get milk for the boy. Everything's so difficult. Lluís has never been able to stand hearing about domestic ^{too} problems, but for a woman, they're almost all there is in times like these. Sitting in my usual easychair, beside the window that looks out on the yard, I'm gazing at this pyramid of cans and feeling so happy, so happy to be so well provided for, that tears are streaming down my cheeks. It's a gentle kind of crying, like spring rain, like the soft rain that right now is falling on the lime tree's new leaves.

What a pity you couldn't have stayed longer. We could have talked about so many things after all these months! So many things, Juli . . . You left so quickly, as soon as you'd unloaded those five crates! The pyramid I've built is as tall as a Christmas tree. I even feel like sticking candles on it!

April 12

Dear Juli,

I'm so lonely that I cling to your every letter. They're my only company! I save each one, and sometimes I reread them. You've written much, much more than he has. The difference in thickness between the pile of yours and his--I save them all--is enormous. It's been a month now since he's written. A whole month without a word!

You have to get rid of the depressing image you have of yourself. Why shouldn't you attract women? Especially since you have the quality we most appreciate: delicacy. You're so thoughtful, you can always imagine yourself in another's place, you know how to stay around when you're wanted and how to disappear when you're afraid you'll be in the way. Why do you say no woman will ever love you? Of course you'll find love. You're the perfect man to make some woman happy. You'll be a wonderful

husband, an exemplary paterfamilias. I can see that from the way you act with Ramonet. He's crazy about you. He remembers every single story you told him when you used to visit us before the war. And the one you told him the day you showed up so unexpectedly with those crates of condensed milk, the one about the three wise men from Poitiers--I don't know how many times he's made me repeat it, laughing and laughing!

X That evening, you asked ~~me~~^I in amazement what made me decide to attend Mass, and I promised you an explanation. Yes, Juli, I owe you an explanation, since it was you who first took me to that ceremony ~~that~~^I I considered so absurd. It's because of you that I'm going now.

It was long before the war started. Perhaps you don't remember it. At Santa Maria del Mar. Who would have thought then that Santa Maria del Mar would be burned, along with every other church in Catalonia? You and I were wandering through those narrow streets, pretending to sell Blast. At the time Lluís hadn't joined our group and I didn't even know him, but you and I took long strolls through the old city, ~~each~~^I with a stack of newspapers under ~~his~~^{our} arm. ~~We~~^{we} had come out in the square in front of the church, and it must have been eleven in the morning.

4 X Suddenly you said, "Let's go in." So we did.

Once we were inside, I knelt beside you because I saw you doing it. I'd never been inside a church. It was all new to me . . . Kneeling beside me, you buried your face in your hands. Afterward I realized you'd been crying, and I felt a kind of annoyance. What were you trying to prove? What did it mean? How far away those days are! How quickly time flies! It must be seven or eight years now, yet how distant and ~~fuzzy~~^{blurred} it all seems. I'd just passed the science department's entrance exam, and I was in love with geology. As for religion, the thought had never crossed my mind that it might hold some interest. In my family, we'd always felt an enormous

respect for science and an absolute indifference toward what they call "metaphysics." For us, it was obvious that science, sooner or later, would lead to a rational society--that is, to scientifically organized anarchy. For us, anarchy was the logical consequence of science. We hadn't the slightest doubt. You can imagine, therefore, how much some of your cracks disconcerted us. I remember one time when you remarked, to everyone's consternation, "It's evident that when we know the exact age, with a margin of error not greater than six minutes and three seconds, of a diplodocus's sacrum ^{bone}, that all men will be brothers."

Why did you say those things? Didn't you realize that, for us, making fun of science was sacrilege? Or were you quite aware of it? When you said things like that, you made us feel that you weren't one of us. That you were like one of those foreign tourists--before the war!--who visited Barcelona looking for local color, because our country seemed so outlandish to them, when for us it was the most ordinary place on earth. One night, you even proposed that we hold our meetings in the dark, forming a "mediumistic chain." To us, you couldn't have made a more shocking suggestion!

On the rare occasions that you'd talked to me about Christianity, it had struck me like that "mediumistic chain," and that's why I felt uncomfortable when I realized, as we came out of Santa Maria del Mar, that you'd cried. I'd found that ceremony so mechanical, so boring, so void of meaning. "But the Gregorian ^{Chants} . . ." you said. If you knew how monotonous they'd sounded to me; and those carnival ^{costumes} ~~outfits~~ . . . I knew, because I'd read it, that Christians believe the host turns into Jesus Christ when the priest blesses it, but what struck me was how long he took, like a cat ^{toying} ~~playing~~ with a mouse. While you, kneeling beside me, buried your face ⁱⁿ ~~between~~ your hands, I had to force myself not to laugh at the

thought of a cat toying with a mouse.

And now I attend Mass every Sunday!

But not really every Sunday, because it's hard to find someone to say it. Masses are now as furtive as our meetings were then. That's why Uncle Eusebi, when he found out I was going, exclaimed, "Secret Masses! They must seem like cell meetings!" And my father, who also knows I attend, hopes it's just my orneriness. "You're a true daughter of mine," he says, "always swimming against the tide! But Masses . . . don't you think that's going too far?"

I owe you an explanation, since it's on account of you that I go to Mass. But how can I explain it to you when I can't explain it to myself? It's so complicated, and at the same time it's so simple . . . Too simple to put into words! Some other day I'll tell you the circumstances that led me there. Today I'm not in the mood. So many weeks without a letter from him! Do you remember how one day you called on us with a bouquet of hyacinths. No; I'm sure you don't remember. I, on the other hand . . . will never forget it! Surprised, Lluís asked, "Where are you going with that?" He'd forgotten it was my Saint's Day. ~~If you knew how~~ the scent of those hyacinths has stayed in my memory. It often comes back to me. It's funny how scents can leave behind such vivid memories: memories that could never be put into words.

If you knew how lonely I feel sometimes! You might say, "But you have the boy." That's true, but children aren't much company. It's the opposite: we grownups have to keep them company. I could try to distract myself, but what good would it do? Distraction is the most tiresome thing on earth. It's better to stay at home and surrender to my sadness. Sadness, if you ~~take it calmly~~ *don't let it upset you*, can be as soothing as spring rain. If we knew how to make the most of our sadness, perhaps we'd discover that

X accepting it is the only happiness possible in this world. But sometimes sadness shows its ugly side. Sometimes sadness is nothing more than emptiness, dryness, weariness of life, and then . . . Even so, distraction is drier and emptier. Distraction wilts everything it touches. Excuse me again for saying all this to you. You're the soul of understanding, my true brother, because what do I really have in common with Llibert, apart from ~~the same father and mother?~~ ^{our parents}

April 16

X The other day I talked about distractions, and don't think that was by accident. People have never been so anxious to get away from it all. It's painful to behold; you see all kinds of things . . . There were never such long lines outside movie houses before the war. And if I don't go myself, it's because I've always found the movies indescribably tedious. ^{yet} But I do something very similar: I read book after book about geology. Shortly after I got married (if I can use that word in my case), I felt sick of my studies, ^{but} and now I've plunged into them again to keep from feeling so empty and alone.

The newspapers are full of battles, of attacks and counterattacks, of positions taken and lost. I've gotten used to it all and no longer pay attention. The butchery has lasted nine months, and people line up outside the movies. The stupider the film, the better. And I can understand them. I myself find mollusks from the Carboniferous Period more interesting than bulletins from the front.

At night, now, when Ramonet and the maid are sleeping, I sit alone in my armchair with a book open on the table, beneath the circle of light cast by the lamp, and I take my mind off my troubles like everyone else, except that I do it in my own fashion. I'm no better than anyone else;

quite the contrary. In tragic times like these, isn't it much more idiotic to puzzle over a bone from a cuttlefish you never knew who lived five hundred million years ago than to go to the movies?

Sometimes when I'm like this, all alone at night, reading, I think I'm seeing that face again, those eyes and that mouth open in astonishment. I never told you about it--or Lluís either. I kept it to myself so as not to depress you, but it's so many months ago . . . It was after midnight, the first of August, a week after you and Lluís set out for the front. The heat was unbearable that last night in July, so oppressive and muggy that I ~~hadn't been able to sleep~~ ^{I couldn't get} ~~to sleep~~. Shortly before dawn, I heard three explosions, dry and sharp, in ~~that~~ ^{the} empty lot behind our house. I'd just dozed off in my chair, and I woke with a start. At the front you don't see the horrors in the rear, and it's better that way. In Barcelona, every night, we heard scattered pistol shots, but I'd never heard them so close ~~to my house~~ ^{to me}. I went outside. It was a little before four A.M., and the sky was just getting light down around the harbor.

He was very old, and his cassock was green from wear, covered with patches and spots where it had been mended. His eyes and mouth were wide open. Terrified, I screamed and called the maid. She came out, half asleep and in her nightgown, along with some neighbors who had heard the shots and my scream. The judge who was on duty finally arrived at six o'clock. The sun had risen and a few flies--the big, green, iridescent kind--were buzzing around the mouth and nose on that scarecrow lying so stiff in the middle of our circle. "We find them every day," said the judge, "some days more and some days less, but there are always lots of them." "Can't you do anything to stop this butchery?" "We're doing what we can, which is next to nothing. For the moment, no one can do anything. The authorities are overwhelmed." "Who do you think he was?" I asked. "Some

poor country priest," the judge replied. "That's certainly what he looks like. When those anarchist flying patrols pass through a village, they burn the church and kill the priest. Often they bring the priest to Barcelona first . . . We find them every morning," he repeated.

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A week later I found myself, quite unexpectedly, attending an ^{secret} underground Mass.

A friend of our family lives in an apartment on Arc del Teatre Street: an old lady, the widow of a printer who'd been one of my father's best friends. Since she never had any children, she lives alone and makes her living as a cleaning woman. I was taking her a "chit" for bread that my brother Llibert had gotten for her. (It's amazing how his pockets are always full of "chits.") Bread had vanished from Barcelona as quickly as silver coins, and everyone was trying to get his hands on those "chits." Three weeks after the war broke out, a loaf of bread was just a memory.

X
I climbed the stairs to the eighth floor, where she lives, to give her that ^{joy} ~~happiness~~ a "chit" for bread! After hugging me in gratitude, she suddenly said, "Follow me. I have to go upstairs." And I followed her to the attic. I hadn't noticed that it was Sunday. I had no idea where she was taking me. In one of the attic rooms, we found about a dozen people, almost all women. The heat was stifling, because the room was low-ceilinged and right underneath the roof. I hadn't been to Mass since that day with you at Santa Maria del Mar, and this one was so different . . . Why had the widow told me to follow her, when she knew I wasn't a Catholic?

X
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X
The few sticks of furniture were ready for the ^{junkyard} ~~garbage~~ pile. For an altar, they used a beat-up, wobbly old chest of drawers on top of a little ~~stand~~: one of those black chests of drawers with white marble tops that you used to see everywhere and that now look so gloomy and old-

fashioned. The strangest thing of all was that the old man presiding was the spitting image of that dead country priest.

X If the anarchist's widow had whispered in my ear, "He's an apostle, the apostle so-and-so," it wouldn't have surprised me. It was all so unexpected! An ordinary apostle, of course: the most ordinary of the twelve. He must have been about eighty years old, and he was dressed like an old worker in patched corduroy pants, a smock, and rope-soled sandals. To say Mass, he'd pulled his chasuble over his head, but his pants stuck out underneath, lending him a slightly ridiculous ^{aspect.} ~~appearance.~~ His gestures were heavy, as though he had trouble controlling his body. When he genuflected, instead of kneeling he fell like a sack of potatoes, and the boards resounded with the blow from his knees. When he turned around to bless us, his gaze reminded me of that murdered priest's open eyes . . . What a look, my God! Why do they say the soul is invisible?

X I went there a few other Sundays, maybe out of curiosity, maybe because it was a way of protesting--even though no one would know and it wouldn't do any good--against the "priest hunt" that during those terrible weeks had spread throughout the land. I would have liked that old man to preach, to say something to us, but he never did. "He says he doesn't know how," the widow explained. "He says he used to preach when he was young, but now that he's old he realizes he has nothing interesting to say, that he's always been a pain when he's tried to preach and that, besides, we already know everything he could tell us. Once he said a few words, or rather mumbled them. "My children," he said, "here you see the Church back in the catacombs. Jesus shows us his face, covered with blood and spittle as when Pilate said, 'Behold the man.'"

X Those were the last words he spoke to us. One Sunday the ^I window (it was at the beginning of November) told me there would be no Mass

because the old man had disappeared. We don't even know his name, and we haven't heard from him since. I'll never forget his weary, pleading look. Sometimes, without realizing it, I commend my soul to him, I pray to him. I'm sure it's absurd to pray to someone who may still be alive, but when I remember that face I feel there's no barrier between this world and the next.

April 18

I received your letter asking for more details about what you call my "conversion," perhaps with a touch of irony. My "conversion," as you put it, is nothing of the sort but rather something floating and nebulous. The letter I wrote the day before yesterday included something about it, and perhaps it's not worth saying anything else. As far as geology's concerned, I'm sure you'll recall that I gave it up when Lluís and I moved in together. Though he always cursed the bourgeoisie, we could live very comfortably on his dividends from "Son of Rusalleda"--in whose offices he never deigned to set foot, since as you know, the manufacture of soup noodles has always seemed revolting and ludicrous to him. I had no need to work for a living, and since Ramonet came along so soon--three weeks after we moved in together--my chores at home kept me busy.

X Though really, the reason I was sick of geology at the time wasn't what I told you and him. I'd grown tired of life itself, but I hid that fact from both of you. I felt paralyzed, hopeless, starting a few months after we moved into this house. You know this house is his, an inheritance from his mother. What I may not have told you is that Lluís, the day after he stopped being a minor, deeded it to me and Ramonet with the stipulation that it would also belong to any other children we might have. You see, Lluís is like that sometimes, but on the other hand, when we were alone

together, he'd begun to fall into those silences that could last for days and days. You often came to call on us in the afternoon, and those visits were the only thing I still looked forward to. He'd also cheer up when you were around. Once we were having a cup of tea--it must have been our eleventh or twelfth. The winter sun streamed through the window and the wood stove, crammed with logs, was red-hot and crackling. We'd been talking, as usual, about a million different things, jumping from one subject to another: about life and death, spiritualism and magic, the mating rituals of scorpions and the New Guinean Papuans' funeral rites. You interrupted him and, as if summing up the conversation, said "In a nutshell: we come from the obscene and we're headed for the macabre."

You like to say what's least expected. You don't realize how much harm a few words can do. A few words we blurt out, that we drop casually, can open an abyss at someone else's feet, a bottomless pit . . . and perhaps that person suffers from vertigo. You enjoy strolling along the edges of cliffs; it makes me dizzy! From that day on, I felt that everything was pointless: studying mollusks from the Carboniferous Period or bringing children into the world, since the world neither had nor could have any meaning. It was just sprawling outskirts--but of what city?--a chaotic space scored by sidings bristling with telephone poles and wires, all purposeless: a dreadful, gray, incoherent industrial landscape enclosed between two endless walls, the obscene on one side, the macabre on the other. What was the sense of anything, if it was all reducible to this?

You don't know how lonely I felt at that time, especially when Lluís was home. Yes, especially at his side. Much lonelier than now, I can assure you. Now he's far away and can't crush me with his silences.

April 19

I'm ashamed of the letter I wrote you yesterday. When I came home from mailing it, I found two from Lluís that the mailman had slipped under the door.

Two letters so affectionate and sad that they moved me more than I can tell. He says he misses me, that we'll start a new life when peace comes, that the war has made him understand how much we mean to each other. He asks me to forgive him for the past and to have faith in the future. And how could I not have faith in him?

Lluís is such an expert at finding the words to make me cry and forget everything that's happened . . . A couple of affectionate letters, and here I am at his feet again. I don't know how many times it's happened. What a fool I must be! He has a knack for making people forgive him, so natural that he's not aware of it; he has no idea. If he did, he'd be one hell of an actor! But no; it comes from within, so spontaneously that when it comes . . . His son's inherited it, like so many other traits. If you could see how he gets me to forgive him after some monumental tantrum, and he has a million of them! He sure knows how to throw a tantrum, but then all of a sudden he'll decide to stop, and then he can be so sweet!

2X Later, in the afternoon, the mailman came back to give me a money order that had been held up: three second lieutenant's paychecks, plus ~~the bonuses~~ ^{the bonuses} what they give him for being in the field, which ~~was~~ ^{is} more than the basic pay. It was a wad of bills. I felt so happy that this morning I couldn't resist buying a secretary desk from the time of Queen Isabella II that I'd seen in a second-hand furniture shop a while ago. I hired a couple of guys to bring it home, and they've just unloaded it. I had them put it in the living room, and above it I hung that oil portrait of his great-grandfather, the one who was a colonel in the First Carlist War; the one you said looks

so much like the boy. I didn't tell you, but I finally found a gilt frame in an antique shop on Palla Street that was just the right size, shape, and style, so now I've framed that great-grandfather whom we'd been keeping in a drawer while we looked for a frame that would fit him. The frame is oval, the gold ^{is} looks old, and the picture looks splendid hanging there. And it's true that they look alike. Just now I was staring at them, the portrait and the boy, and I could imagine Ramonet with those gigantic sideburns and that huge red beret. I could die laughing! If you knew what my family thinks of ~~the~~ Carlists! And colonels!

Ramonet has turned out to be a real Brocà. You can tell these Brocàs have war in their blood. He never stops whining and pleading with me to let him go to war with his father. The older he gets, the more he resembles Lluís . . . as for me, every day I feel older and more childish, both at once. I'm twenty-one years old; yesterday was my birthday. I'm a grownup now.

May 3

Yes, Juli, I was baptized. Hadn't I told you? Forgive me. I'm in such a daze that I can't remember when I wrote you last and what I said. Was it two weeks ago? All I can recall is that it was before your second visit, as unexpected as your first had been . . . But I want to be honest with you: in spite of everything you said during that long--and short!--night, I still wasn't sure. You thought it was very important, but as for me . . . I was happy the way I was: ~~more or less~~ vaguely Christian, nothing more. It was hard for me to decide to do something like that just to give you pleasure.

But I did it, and if you want to know the truth, I don't feel any different. I'm writing to you in my chair, by the window, and from time to

to time I glance at that pyramid of canned milk, which has shrunk quite a bit. You didn't have to apologize for not bringing more. I imagine you can't do it very often, and besides, I have enough to keep going for the time being. I felt so happy when I saw you show up unexpectedly again! The night passed so quickly as we talked . . . I remember everything you said. I've been turning it over and over in my mind, rooted to my chair like my grandmother is to hers. Now, I mean right at this moment, I feel annoyed at myself for giving in to you. Why should someone as intelligent as you attribute such importance to an external ceremony like baptism? Yes, I know all that stuff about sacraments and the divine grace they instill . . . but the only sacrament I really understand is marriage!

2X And when I call marriage a "sacrament," I mean what theologians mean: not the ceremony, whether it's religious or civil, and which strictly speaking isn't necessary. I mean the joining together of a man and woman in a permanent bond ~~and~~ with the hope of transmitting life. What else could that be ~~but~~ a sacrament? Something so horribly indecent it makes me shudder to think of it!

But baptism . . . I don't know what to say. Is it really possible that by sprinkling a little water on our heads and saying a few magic words we can save our souls, which otherwise would be damned? Is there really anyone on earth still capable of believing something so . . . stupid? Excuse me, but I have to tell you how I feel.

3X I know you'll reply that it's not that, that many among the baptized will be damned and many who were never baptized will be saved, because God's ways are inscrutable, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. Just as you like, but in that case, what's the point of being baptized? I did it myself, but only because you insisted. For no other reason, I assure you.

From my armchair, through the open window, I can see the lime tree

in the yard, bejeweled with pale green, silvery buds, and they remind me of the worst days in that time when I despised everything, absolutely everything, even that poor lime tree. That was when your crack, "We come from the obscene and we're headed for the macabre," kept ~~pounding~~ ^{thudding} in my ~~brain~~ ^{head}. Ramonet still couldn't get around except by crawling, and I watched him like someone watching a kitten, and I asked myself what right I'd had to give him life when it could only end in death--this life which is nothing more and can be nothing more than a long, hopeless ~~agony~~ ^{death}. And nonetheless, I loved my son. I was crazy about the boy, but wasn't that another trick nature played on us, a trick like the one that drives us to the act that will transmit life? Would we get any fun out of it if we brought them into the world as they'll end up, the way my grandmother is now, for instance? It was November then. The lime tree was bare, and the gardener had trimmed it, cutting it back so it was almost all trunk. That lime tree seemed as stupid to me as everything else. Every year the same story: losing leaves, sprouting new ones, and altogether, for what? With what purpose? As stupid as Lluís's beard! During that time, I heard him every morning as I lay in bed, because he got up earlier than I did and he liked to shave not in the bathroom but at the washbasin in our bedroom, so that as I lay there half asleep, I could hear the razor scraping across his ~~beard~~ ^{cheek}. As stupid as a beard you shave off each day and that sprouts again, day in and day out. Everything on earth was monotonous, senseless repetition. It was then that I hated geology, which cynically reveals, perhaps more than anything else, this endless, useless repetition of identical phenomena, the hideous monotony of layer upon layer of sediments, each representing tens or hundreds of thousands of years, deposited ~~one~~ ^{each} on top of the other till they're miles thick: time's ~~incomprehensible~~ ^{senseless} abyss that fills us with nausea . . . And that lime tree's

24 trunk was an obscene stake driven into my head, driving me crazier than all the migraine headaches on earth! It stood there, silouetted against the light. In that November, fortunately so far away, time crept forward imperceptibly, crushing me with its slowness as Lluís did with his silences. Time, which had seemed like a magician when I was a little girl! As far back as I can remember, I loved the way time passed. I loved time and the trail it left: the past. Sometimes, in ^{those} the narrow streets ⁱⁿ of the old part of town, where I was born and where my parents have always lived, I'd stop, entranced by some old doorway with a date: 1653, 1521. I'd count the years that had passed since people like us had built it, and those stones would make me feel less alone. The older they were, the more I felt their company. Later, as I grew older, geology attracted me because those sedimentary rocks that count the centuries by the millions gave me a great sense of security. It's strange: if I make an effort ~~to remember~~ ^{to}, I can recapture my feelings when I wa^s five or six and already savored this indescribable pleasure of having a past. It's hard to understand, but it's true: a child of five or six already has a past like an abyss.

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Toward the middle of that November when time had stopped and sometimes felt like a hand strangling me, my mother visited me one afternoon. I could barely follow what she was saying. I felt completely cut off from the world, as though all contact between me and the outside world had been broken and there was no way to reestablish it. She chattered away as usual, talking about one thing after another, and I ~~didn't~~ ^{couldn't} even follow what she was saying. In the midst of those buzzing words that I perceived like the babble of a distant brook, a few suddenly stood out: she was telling me about an unusual event that had caused a sensation on Hospital Street. A girl had thrown herself from her seventh-^{story} floor apartment with her newborn son, "A young girl, quite normal--at

least that's what we all thought. She seemed happy to be pregnant with her first child. No one can understand it." "But it's so obvious!" I blurted out. My mother looked at me like someone staring at a madwoman, shook her head, and changed the subject. Why am I telling you this now?

Because shortly afterward you gave me--also for my Saint's Day--that copy of the New Testament. Ever since then I've kept it on the table. The bookmark is still where you left it. When I opened it, I found the famous passage where Jesus says that to be saved we must eat his flesh and drink his blood. All the disciples, upon hearing this monstrous idea, forsake him, and ^{the apostles} ~~his disciples~~, also uncertain, begin to leave too. Only ~~the twelve~~ ^{Simon} apostles remain. And Jesus asks them, "Will ^{him} ~~ye~~ also go away?" And you'd underlined Simon's reply, "Lord, to whom shall ^{we} ~~ye~~ go? Thou hast the words of eternal life." I went through the whole book, ^{eager} ~~anxious~~ to see if you'd underlined other passages, but you hadn't. Only this one! And on the flyleaf you'd written, "The Cross or the Absurd."

The Cross or the Absurd . . .

Some days later, one rainy ^{evening} ~~afternoon~~ I was coming home in a streetcar from the market. In one of those coincidences so rare in big cities like Barcelona, I saw Lluís standing on a corner. It was dark out, but he was under a streetlamp and the gaslight shone on him. I was sitting by the window, gazing out without seeing anything. Raindrops like tears streamed down the streetcar window, and outside everything was a chaos of automobiles, streetcars, pedestrians hurrying along the sides of the ^{Rambla} ~~Ramblas~~ under their umbrellas--I was coming from the Boqueria Market--while the central promenade was almost deserted beneath the plane trees' bare branches. The rain glistened on the oilcloths the ^{dealers} ~~newsstands~~ had spread over their papers. And there he was on that corner, blurry amid the crowd. We were going through one of our worst periods,

X days and days without speaking to each other . . . And there he was, on the corner of Carme Street, waiting to cross along with everyone else. The rain had soaked his hair and trickled down his cheeks; as usual, he'd gone out without a hat or umbrella. He looked so anonymous amid the crowd, on that dark, rainy, Barcelonan November ^{evening} ~~afternoon~~; so anonymous . . . A person never looks more alone than in the midst of a crowd. His eyes stared blankly ahead. He even seemed unshaven--unusual for him--or maybe he just had a five-o'clock shadow. I saw him through that rainy window, but he didn't see me. For a moment I thought he was crying, but no; it was the raindrops trickling from his hair. The eyes in his expressionless face looked very big. It was their blankness that made them seem so. What a hopeless gaze! I'd never seen a look like that on his face, and I felt like getting off the streetcar, which had stopped, and running to him so we could cry together, so I could help him shoulder the burden that seemed to be crushing him, though I didn't know what it was. But the streetcar started up again, and once I got home and was alone in our bedroom, I threw myself on the bed and wept and wept, thinking that X sooner or later another streetcar would ^{come} ~~start up~~ and another pane, even mistier, would separate us forever, that I'd see him but he wouldn't see me, nor would he ever see me again. I'd see him, more alone than ever; more lost amid that seething, indifferent multitude; emptier than ever . . . and he wouldn't see me, he wouldn't see me however much he might long to; then, when it was too late! I wept and wept, ridiculously, pitying him and myself. Afterward, as after a cloudburst, the sky suddenly cleared. I no longer hated Lluís; I felt sorry for him.

No, Juli; it's not that Lluís is sick of me. Don't ever say that again. That's not what I told you that night; that's not it at all! I know perfectly well that he needs me, even if he doesn't realize it. He thinks

he's annoyed by those who care about him. It's such an absurd psychological mechanism that it took me a long time to understand it. And I suffered a lot before I finally understood. Lluís is terribly unjust toward those who love him; ^{toward} with his uncle, for instance. I'll tell you about it some other day. Lluís is so contradictory. He was always talking about his brother Ramon, for example. You know he's nuts about him, but he'd never taken me to meet him. When I asked him to, he'd reply, "You'd be scared out of your wits, appalled. You wouldn't be able to stand it." I couldn't get him to budge, but he kept on talking about him in a way I can only call worshipful. He thinks he's an unbeliever, of course. Him, an unbeliever! He can be a monster, sometimes he's been one with me, but an unbeliever . . .

Finally, one day he took me to the Brothers Hospitalers and I met his famous brother Ramon. We hardly had a chance to speak. He was feeding a bunch of idiots, who drooled and grunted: ten or twelve grown-up idiots between twenty and forty years old, who were so painful to behold--and he fed them and wiped the spittle from their chins as though it were the most natural thing in the world, just as I did with Ramonet, who was eleven months old . . . One, while Ramon was feeding him spoonfuls of soup, wet his pants, and Lluís, visibly uncomfortable, tugged at my sleeve and said, "Let's go. No one ^{can} ~~could~~ bear this spectacle." For days and days it ^{stuck} ~~stayed~~ in my mind. Some nights I dreamt about idiots, and I never dream. Imagine me telling you all this! Let me just say, to finish off this long letter, that a few weeks later I was sitting in my usual chair by the window. It was a clear December afternoon, and I was staring at the evening star as it sank toward the horizon. It twinkled for a moment ^{if} and then it set. Staring blankly, with my mouth open, I thought I saw one of those idiots, the one who'd wet his pants, and at the same

time I heard a kind of far-off voice saying, "the obscene or the macabre, the Cross or the Absurd." I tried to understand how the evening star could have been there, shining so brightly, and now it was gone, as if it had never been there at all! How long an instant can last, the instant that separates what is no more from what still was . . . The past from a minute ago is as past as millions of centuries ago! Who will ever be able to understand it? And suddenly, it seemed as though that stupid trunk, the lime tree's bare trunk that I saw silouetted against the dusk, it seemed that a transverse stake was sprouting from that obscene, macabre stake . . . something to cling to! "The Cross or the Absurd," I repeated to myself without really understanding. Please don't laugh at me. It had nothing to do with Saint Philomena. Don't even think of such a comparison. But it was then that I understood your words: the Cross or the Absurd. Then I understood that old verse: O Crux, ave, spes unica.

Don't laugh at me, I beg you. Maybe sometimes my letters seem corny. We'd be in a real fix if we couldn't be corny from time to time. If you knew what a comfort it is to have a friend whom I can tell everything that comes into my head, however corny it might be . . . As you can see, I spend hours and hours writing to you. Of course I could burn the letters after writing them, but I'd rather send them. After all, it's in order to communicate with someone that I write all this--and that someone could only be you.

May 7

X You ask for more details about my baptism. It's funny that you attach so much importance to it, when for me it has so little. If you knew what an empty ceremony it felt like, how indifferent it left me . . . Not knowing where to go, and since you'd insisted so much, I~~it~~ mentioned it

L

X to that woman, the anarchist's widow. They ^{id} stopped saying Mass in her attic after the old Jesuit disappeared (she told that in fact he was a Jesuit), but she knows of another house where they hold services almost every Sunday. A house where she's toiled for years, and because of that they have ~~complete~~ ^{trust} faith in her. ^{completely}

X It's a house on a narrow street in the Saint ^{Justin} ~~Just~~ neighborhood, almost the same as the others around it: an old, gray building. But inside . . . I couldn't believe my eyes! I'd never been in a house like that one. X It's ~~strange~~ ^{odd} that the anarchist patrols haven't requisitioned it yet. They must not realize that the crustiest old bluebloods have their palaces in the oldest neighborhoods. It's also odd that so many of them have stayed in Barcelona and managed to survive all the horrors.

When the anarchist's widow, Ramonet, and I arrived, a group of ladies, most of them middle-aged, was waiting for us. There were perhaps twenty-five or thirty of them. I was astonished to see so many, and it made me feel embarrassed, especially since Ramonet started whining that he wanted to go home, and the more they fussed over him the more he buried his head in my skirts. Then, as often happens, he suddenly cut his tantrum short and decided to make himself agreeable, to those ladies' great delight as they fought over his attention. While we were waiting for the priest and godfather, who still hadn't arrived, I looked around the room. It was immense, with a high ceiling, the biggest drawing room I'd ever seen. Needless to say, the doors and windows were shut, and to make sure no one could hear a sound from outside, they'd even drawn the thick green damask curtains. An enormous rock-crystal chandelier held twenty or thirty burning candles. They were real wax candles and filled the whole room with their scent. Seeing my surprise, the lady of the house explained that they were only lit on important occasions, "like today," she added,

X
fixing me with the most gracious of smiles. The walls were lined with big, gilt-framed mirrors alternating with old paintings ("by Francesc Pla i Duran ~~The Vigata~~", she said). The ceiling was decorated with frescos representing Paris's verdict or some such mythological malarky. There was a sofa in each corner, surrounded by four armchairs, period pieces made of mahogany and upholstered with red velvet. In the middle of one of the walls was a big walnut door in which scenes had been carved. Facing that door were two large windows, and in the middle of the other two walls stood two bureaus, the biggest and most beautiful bureaus I'd ever seen in my life. Each one must be worth a fortune. They're imposing in their massiveness, with an abundance of exquisite marquetry and carved latches you could spend days and days gazing at. But the prettiest thing was all that space left over, all that blank, white wall on either side of the bureaus and windows, and especially on either side of those double walnut doors. What a joy bare white walls are, how restful and ~~relaxing~~ ^{soothing} to the eyes.

X
In the middle of the room, beneath the chandelier, they'd placed a table they called a guéridon, and on top of that guéridon a kind of silver bowl, "An old washbasin; it's been in the family for generations," the mistress of the house told me, eager to satisfy my curiosity. I gathered that it was needed for what we were going to do. I had no idea ~~of~~ ^{how} a baptism is performed; I'd never seen one. I already mentioned that almost all the ladies were on the elderly side, fifty years or older. But one of them was young and very blonde, apparently the other one's daughter-in-law, and she began to speak so enthusiastically about the decision I'd made that I felt uncomfortable and didn't know what to say. Finally the priest arrived, bustling about like someone who's always in a rush. He was young too, under thirty, clean-shaven, disguised as a worker but

X
impeccably neat, his gestures firm and quick, almost automatic. I'll tell you the honest truth: I disliked him at first sight. To conquer this feeling, I told myself he was risking his life to perform his duties, and that all those ladies had also placed themselves in danger. The godfather still hadn't shown up, and the priest kept glancing impatiently at his watch. Each time he did so, he abruptly lifted his arm, peered at the watch, and even put his ear to it as though he were afraid it had stopped, annoyed at the minutes we were making him waste. At last the godfather appeared: a charming old man, very courteous, very shy, very likeable, who was obviously delighted to see all those ladies. He kissed some of their hands. I would have liked my godmother to be the anarchist's widow, but they'd decided it all in advance. It had to be the lady of the house. I would have had to make a great fuss to change their plans. And besides, I was feeling more and more indifferent to all those preparations that meant nothing to me.

"Well, now that we're all here," said the priest, raising his voice, and the ladies instantly fell silent. He'd slipped on an alb the lady had taken out of one of the bureaus, and the ceremony began. The only fun in it all was that it was clandestine. The priest explained the meaning of each thing he did, but the more he explained the less sense it made to me. Perhaps it would be better if they didn't explain anything, if they just said the words they have to say. The more they carry on, the more they ruin it. Thank God Ramonet enjoyed himself; as far as I'm concerned . . . it seemed so long and tedious. The priest was an energetic, resolute type, and this was precisely what got on my nerves: so much energy, such resolve, so much conviction! He spoke with an aplomb that irritated me. How could he be so sure about such dark, puzzling things? The other priest, on the contrary, the old Jesuit in the attic, was so obviously

unsure of everything! His look, that of a decrepit, beaten apostle, held so little conviction but so much faith . . .

X I think that if the old Jesuit from Arc del Teatre Street had baptized me, I would have felt something. Maybe--who knows--I would have felt profoundly moved. I remembered the old man's first Mass, in that slummy old attic--where he lived in hiding, as I learned from the anarchist's widow. In fact, it was she who had hidden him. I gradually learned all this afterward. And the memory of that man brought back the suffocating heat of that dreadful summer when they were hunting priests ^{all over} ~~throughout~~ Catalonia. How simply he said Mass, as though it were the most everyday, ordinary thing. And since flies swarmed through the dormer windows, there were always a few on his upper lip, which was beaded with sweat. He didn't brush them away, and I felt I was seeing the other face, the dead priest's face with those other flies. If he'd baptized me . . . Why didn't it occur to me to ask him then, when he was still in our midst?

As for now . . .

X The priest sprinkled me and the boy from a scalloped silver bowl; also taken from one of the bureaus. They have everything in that house. The mistress even showed me a "baptism suit" from the eighteenth century, which all the sons of that house had worn since the archduke's time, "because in this house," she said, "we support the Hapsburgs, of course." It was a sumptuous piece of clothing, made entirely of lace, but it was of no use to us. Ramonet couldn't have fit into that suit made for a baby, and I had even less chance. "You should know," the lady added, "that it was used to baptize one of the Prince of Darmstadt's nephews who was born in Barcelona during the siege of 1714. We were his godparents, too." If I'd taken her words literally, I would have been obliged to think that lady and her father-in-law (for that was the old man's relation to her) had reached

the venerable age of over two hundred.

X The marquis (one of the other ladies had whispered to me that he was the Marquis of X, and if I write "X" it's not to imitate novels about lords and ladies or to protect him if this letter falls into the wrong hands but simply because I can't remember the title she mentioned) seemed old but not ~~all~~ that old and was genuinely charming. What a considerate, unpretentious old man, with something innocent and hopeful in his gaze! "He's nearly ninety years old," said the old lady who had told me he was the Marquis of X, "and he refuses to go abroad. He's always been an eccentric."

He heard her and laughingly replied, "At my age, one prefers dying at home to living among strangers."

I just realized that telling you about these ladies and marquises, I might give you the notion that they were dressed as such. Nothing could be further from the truth. They were disguised as factory workers, like everyone else in Barcelona except my father. My father not only refuses to forgo his customary tie and jacket but ever since the revolution has worn a hat, though before he went bareheaded. "The revolutionary circus," as he calls it, gets on his nerves. The strangest thing is that you can see they're aristocrats a mile away despite their disguises. Perhaps it's that they overdo it with their proletarian outfits and therefore look fake, or maybe it's their way of walking, of moving, of talking, which has always been so different from construction workers'--because in reality, they're disguised as construction workers, as though they didn't suspect that there were other varieties, including some who are prosperous and as well-dressed as anyone.

After the ceremony, the lady of the house served tea. A servant--also disguised as a construction worker--brought us chairs, arranging them in a

circle around the guéridon; a general conversation began. The priest glanced at his watch again and said he couldn't stay long, and that in the meantime he'd record the two baptisms. He pulled out a book in which he records, as far as I could make out, all the ones he's presided at since the Church had to go underground, and he asked the lady of the house for two sheets of fine paper so I could have some kind of certificate. He's only fulfilling his duties, braving all kinds of dangers, but I can't help it: all those complications irritated me. They seemed so ^{raw} bureaucratic! And one small detail upset me.

On Ramonet's ~~baptism~~ ² certificate, the priest had written: "Ramon de Brocà i Milmany, natural son of Lluís de Brocà i Rusalleda and Trinitat Milmany i Catassús . . ." Would you believe this "natural" cut me to the quick? It didn't bother me that he'd put the same thing down for me, since I'm so used to seeing it on my papers . . . I asked if he couldn't just write "son" for Ramonet, without further qualification. "No, madam; these are our instructions." "But it's not his fault that he's illegitimate!" "He's not illegitimate," he replied, as though he found the word repugnant. He explained that "natural" has no bad connotations, since the only children who aren't natural are adopted and that natural children become legitimate when their parents marry, "unlike illegitimate ones, the children of parents who can't marry." Since you're a lawyer, it must make you laugh to think I didn't know any of this, but I think a lot of people are confused about it. "Of course," the priest added, smiling and gesturing toward those seated, "we all hope that as soon as your . . . husband can come to Barcelona, you'll legitimize your union with a Church wedding." I realized that he thought we'd had a civil wedding and I wanted to let him know that wasn't the case. "To us," he replied, "it makes no difference. Marriage must be a sacrament."

And that's how I feel too, Juli . . . if it's not a sacrament, then what is marriage? But I couldn't help it. However much I agreed--at least in a certain way, which perhaps he didn't perceive--with many of the things he said, I didn't like that priest. His aplomb, his conviction, his energetic expression and gestures . . . and those constant glances at his watch, as though he wanted to make us feel we were wasting his precious time!

Meanwhile, the servant had brought us a big platter of toast, which he'd left on the guéridon. It was a solid silver platter, like the bowl they'd used for the baptism, and the plates he passed out were gilt-edged Sèvres china. The elegant tableware contrasted with what he served: rationed bread, sliced very thin to make it go further and topped with a thin layer of lard. It was still hot from the oven, and everyone pronounced it delicious.

"Who would have thought," one lady said, "that the time would come when we'd spread lard instead of butter on our toast?"

"And we're lucky to have that," another replied.

X "A few weeks ago," said another, "an uncle ~~of ours~~ ^{of mine} in New York sent us a dozen cans of corned beef through the United States consulate. Before the war, we'd never heard of corned beef, and if someone had told us there was such a thing as canned meat we'd have fainted with disgust."

"And yet it tastes so good," the lady of the house sighed. "There are so many delicious things we had no idea existed. After the war, I think I'll go on using lard instead of butter and corned beef instead of roast veal. I've never eaten with so much pleasure!"

Then she served tea. You can find all the tea you want in Barcelona, no doubt because so few people drink it. What's totally disappeared is sugar; but the lady of the house, along with her lard, had received a few pounds of sugar from London, and that tea tasted so good to me, as

sugary as when we used to drink it together! I still have tea at home, but without sugar. As far as saccharine is concerned, some people like it but I find it revolting.

All that, the toast with lard and the tea with sugar, was of course for a special occasion: our baptisms, which those ladies apparently considered an historic event. It made me uneasy that they attached so much importance to it. I couldn't see what all the fuss was about. From their euphoric comments, I gathered that for them it wasn't merely an event but a victory.

I gathered this especially from what the young blonde told me. She interpreted my decision as admitting they were right: they, of all people! When I caught on, I thought it was funny, because I felt as alien among them as I would have felt among a tribe of Papuans. At one point, I expressed my surprise that there was only one man among so many women. The young blonde stared at me in amazement.

"All the men have fled the Red zone. Didn't you know? Except for grandpa, who always has to be different. Imagine: when everyone else was a Republican he was a monarchist, and now that everyone's . . ."

"A fascist," he interrupted very gently, "I'm still the incorrigible liberal I've been all my life. That's it, isn't it?"

And turning to me with his disarmingly childish smile, "Madam . . . or miss, since according to the reverend we can't consider you married with a civil wedding . . ."

"I didn't have a civil wedding either," I insisted.

"The reverend has already told us that makes no difference. Would you believe this is the first time in my life that I regret having no talent? Yes, I never minded having no more talent than the smidgen Our Lord gave me, but now I'd like to have as much as Stendhal so I could write a

novel called Neither the Red nor the Black."

"Don't mind him. Grandfather has always been a little . . . odd," the young blonde told me, though I understood that he was actually her husband's grandfather. "Would you believe he doesn't even listen to Radio Seville? And if we tell him what we've heard, he doesn't seem to care."

"Whoever wins, I've lost," he muttered, still smiling at me. And he hung his head, as though overcome by a sudden wave of melancholy.

"But grandpa, while our men are risking their lives on the battlefield . . . Don't you think, my dear," she added, addressing me, "that in times like these indifference is suicidal?"

Hearing her say "our men," referring to those on the other side, and in a tone that assumed that I was with her all the way, I stared at the anarchist's widow. They'd seated her in one of the chairs in their midst, speaking to her from time to time with marked condescension. You could see she was delighted to be there, among those rich ladies, and didn't seem to grasp the meaning of what they were saying. "She's the cleaning woman," I thought, "overjoyed because for once in her life they've let her sit among them." ^{But then} Suddenly I understood (when she realized I was looking at her, she gazed back, smiling and with a slightly dazed expression) that what made her seem so happy and so far away, so far above our conversation, was that I and Ramonet had been baptized. I suddenly understood that she was worth far more than all of us put together! Still glancing at his watch, the priest took pieces of toast from the platter. The young blonde grew more animated as she spoke of "our men," and about the day--soon to come, according to her--when they'll reach Barcelona. And I listened to her, thinking, "Who does she take me for?" At one point I interrupted to let her know I'd been baptized on the advice of a Red officer, and to emphasize it, I stared straight at her and added, "As

Red as they come!"

2X / It was she who used that ridiculous adjective to refer to you, the
 Republican soldiers. Amused, the marquis looked at my ^{very} sympathetically. On
 the other hand, it seemed--and how I wish I were mistaken--that the
 priest was displeased by my outburst. In any case, the conversation
 languished, the priest took advantage of the lull to excuse himself,
 X "appalled at how much time ^{had} passed," the lady of the house saw him to
 the door, and the gathering broke up.

X All that was left was the finishing touch: as I was also leaving,
 holding Ramonet's hand and with the anarchist's widow behind me, since
 the hallway from the drawing room to the front door ^{was} is dark, I tripped on
 the edge of the thick carpet and fell face down.

#

When I found myself outside in the fresh air, I felt as though a
 weight had been lifted off me. Why should I kid you? It all seemed like a
 big misunderstanding. And it left a nasty taste in my mouth.

The only thing resembling the "divine joy" I'd read about in religious
 books was what I felt some days later, seeing how much our baptism upset
 my mother. Without remorse, I savored this intense, wicked pleasure, and I
 feel no shame in telling you about it. I've even suspected that I decided to
 take this step not so much at your insistence but for the pleasure of
 getting in a quarrel with her. It makes me shudder to think how much
 wickedness we have inside us.

May 13

You ask me how that meeting with my mother went, saying I
 probably could have charged admission, and since you put it that way, yes,
 I certainly could have.

That apartment on Hospital Street where I spent seventeen years of my life--now I feel I couldn't stand it for seventeen days. Her constant presence would be especially unbearable, a presence that weighs on you. I don't know how to put it. My mother's one of those people you can hear even when they're not speaking. They neither can nor want to pass unnoticed. My mother . . . it's sad not to be able to love your own mother! We have so much malice hidden inside us, and I've had it for a long time. I disliked her even when I was a little girl. She's always preferred Llibert, as is natural since they're so much alike . . . They both see the world as a delicious pie they're not allowed to sink their teeth into. Their only problem is how to get a slice. They're so different from my poor father. He's always romanticized the proletariat. Years ago, they offered him a job editing a commercial magazine. His journalistic experience at Blast would have stood him in good stead, he could have made a decent living. He turned them down. He can't understand the idea of writing with the sole purpose of making a good living. He cares so little about making a good living! He wants to share the life of the proletariat. Nothing could ever get him to leave that apartment on Hospital Street and move to a better one, as Llibert is now proposing. If they made my father move from where he's always lived, he'd pine away and die.

Yes; I went to see my parents. I climbed that staircase, divided into two sets of steps that meet at every landing and then split apart again: a waste of space that could have been used to make the apartments bigger. Four doors on every landing . . . The walls along the stairs are still damp and peeling, even more covered with inscriptions in pencil and charcoal. I remember that you called them graffiti and said they would be interesting data for a study in mass psychology. Once you even began to copy them down. Now you'd see a lot more: a few months of war have spawned a

new wave of graffiti, both political and obscene. As far as that banister is concerned, the one you pronounced a masterpiece of baroque ironwork, it's being eaten away by rust because no one bothers to paint it. If you touch it, your hand is covered with red. The building's a hundred years old. I'm sure you'll remember the date above the front entrance: 1837. Romanticism . . . Was it customary to spend everything on the staircase in that era?

The rail on the banister up to the first floor is copper and shines like gold; it's the only thing the concierge cleans. As long as the copper shines, nothing else matters. The steps themselves are also differentiated by social class: the first flight is marble. After that, they're ordinary tiles with wooden edges, and everything--tiles and wood--has been worn away by ~~so~~ many feet. A hundred years of feet wearing them down . . . Almost as many as have walked down Hospital Street, which is like a narrow

gorge always full of water. How sad those human rivers are! You can see that a hundred years ago, different classes shared the same buildings, but the poorer you were, the closer you lived to Heaven. As far as I can remember, except for the first floor, which has one ~~one~~ apartment, inhabited by a doctor who also has his office there, the apartments on the second floor are as cramped as those on the seventh, where my parents live. There's still that newsdealer on the ground floor, but his business has expanded: now, in addition to newspapers and magazines, he has cheap paperbacks, not to sell but to rent. For ten cèntims, he'll rent you one for a whole week, and he has a big clientele in the neighborhood. As I climbed the stairs, I passed fifty people coming down. I'm not

exaggerating. I counted them: exactly forty-nine. After all, apart from the

first floor, there are six floors with four apartments each: ~~6 x 4 = 24~~ ^{six times four equals} ~~24~~ ^{twenty-four} families. And they're by no means small families. Ours, with only five members, was the exception. As I climbed the stairs I could hear

Policàrpi's voice coming from 4A. She spends her life yelling up the airshaft, arguing with the woman in 5B. To think that for years I heard her shouts and hardly noticed them. Now they'd give me a splitting headache.

How habit-forming comfort, peace and quiet, white walls, and space are--plus a few pieces of furniture, carefully chosen one by one. That clutter of ridiculous junk: umbrella stand, sideboard, dressing tables, rows of chairs with imitation-leather seats lined up along the hallway to make people trip . . . I think the sensation of squalor never comes from what's ^{missing} lacking but rather, like that of luxury, from excess. Who knows, maybe squalor and luxury are twins! That same apartment could have a completely different air if instead of adding to it they took things away: the dark red wallpaper, the print of Pi i Maragall with his Phrygian cap, half the chairs, the umbrella stand, and above all that heavy lamp, that gaslamp converted to electricity, that hangs from the ^{ceiling} ceiling above the dining room table, threatening to crush those eating there.

Father wasn't ^{at} home that day. Mother told me he's hardly been around lately in order to avoid quarreling with Llibert. It turns out that Llibert wanted to move them into a first-floor apartment on the Passeig de Gràcia, confiscated of course from its owner, and father indignantly refused. "I'd die of shame," he replied. Mother says they had an extremely heated argument. Apparently since he's been able to sink his teeth into it, this seems like the best of all possible worlds to Llibert. Father flung in his face everything that's happened these past months: all the murders, all the churches burned to the ground, all the harmless citizens hunted down like rabid dogs. Llibert listened with a superior smile, "There are always fools who don't know how to adapt to changing circumstances," was his sole comment, "eternal losers, failures." Beside himself, father told him to

get out and never set foot in his house again. Mother had a lot of trouble getting them to make up, and even now it's more a truce than a real peace, based on carefully avoiding subjects that would make the storm break out again.

She and I were on the back porch, which looks out on the airshaft. You've never been in this part of the house. My parents don't like outsiders to see it; it's where my grandmother lives. My grandmother Trini, my father's mother. I got my name from her. They say when I was born, they couldn't decide whether to call me Vida or Alegria. Vida would have been horrible, don't you think? But Alegria wouldn't have been so bad, except--alas!--that it would have suited me so badly . . . Unable to decide between these two names, my father finally opted for his mother's.

X My grandmother's trapped in her wheelchair. From her chair she sees the airshaft, which is narrow and deep as a well (imagine: seven stories), shared by three apartments as shabby and decrepit as ours. The air in it is stagnant and, except in summer, ~~is~~ as dark, dense, and damp as water. It always smells stuffy, like a room that's never aired. You can always hear women shouting and arguing from one window to another. The porch facing ours has a few flowerpots with broad-leaved plants, along with a parrot on a perch and a monkey on a chain. This has been my aunt's entire universe for many, many years. A monkey and parrot who fight; the monkey teases and the parrot ~~shrieks~~ ^{squawks}.

X How many years? I don't know. I can't remember ever seeing her in any other state. She hardly speaks; she expresses herself through inarticulate sounds. There are days when she can't recognize anyone, not even my father, who's her only son. We talk about her in her presence as though she were a new-born baby.

That day we talked for a long time. Most conversations in Barcelona

X have to do with rationing. I find it a tiresome subject, since discussing it doesn't solve anything and it's idiotic to make oneself feel even hungrier. Better to distract yourself, to talk about something else. So I talked about our baptism.

She stared at me in silence, as though I were crazy. It was only after a long pause that she blurted out, "What sinister stupidity!"

"Why stupidity?" I asked, "And come to think of it, why sinister?"

"Dogma," she replied, screwing up her face. And I remembered that she'd made that same face and also said "Dogma" the day I'd told her about the poor country priest killed in the lot behind my house. I'd told her how I'd found his corpse, how worn and patched his cassock was, how old he looked. I'd explained the whole thing to her, saying it cried out to Heaven for the authorities to put an end to it. That's when she'd made that face, saying "Bah, dogma!"--her sole comment.

"So now you're a staunch Catholic, huh?" she added after a sarcastic pause. "And you're happy to belong to the old guard? I suppose you did it to annoy me: you know there's hardly anything that could annoy me as much as this. There were no ignoramuses in my family. My grandfather helped burn monasteries in 1835, my father did the same in 1873--during the First Republic--and I did the same in 1909."

"And Llibert, following this sacred tradition, took part in the one last year," I replied. "But mom, I'm not a traditionalist like you and Llibert."

"A traditionalist! The Carlists are traditionalists!" she shouted.

"They're the traditionalists, those toads who slurp holy water, sacristy rats gnawing holy wafers!"

And the next thing--I could see it coming--was that nonsense about nuns buried alive "in handcuffs." I don't know how many times in my life I've heard her repeat this gibberish and heard my father tell her not to

say it because it's totally untrue. When they burned the monasteries and convents in 1909, the revolutionaries--just like last summer--opened the monks' and nuns' tombs. In one old convent they found some vertical niches; apparently in that convent they'd entombed the nuns standing up. This was what made people start saying they'd been buried alive, especially since their arms were crossed over their breasts and there were chains on their wrists. According to my father, a doctor went to investigate, and after examining the corpses concluded that those chains were nothing more than the last vestiges of rosaries. Since the beads had been wood, they'd rotted away, leaving the chains they'd been strung on. But neither my father nor all the doctors on earth will get it out of her head that monks and nuns commit the most ^{heinous} ~~atrocious~~ crimes.

I have the impression that when you and Lluís rebelled against bourgeois prejudices, you had no idea what proletarian prejudices might be like. It's not just our baptism that shocks her. She's also shocked, for example, by the secretary desk I bought the other day, and even more by the great-grandfather with the sideburns and beret. That's what provoked her diatribe against "traditionalists." She could have claimed that it was dangerous to flaunt Carlist great-grandfathers in times like these, but that wasn't what it was ^{all} ~~about~~. It's that she finds it all, the desk from the time of Isabella II and the great-grandfather with his red beret, "horribly out of date." Instead of the secretary desk, she'd like me to have an umbrella stand like hers, one of those umbrella stands with a mirror and a brass hatrack as well as a cylindrical glazed pot for umbrellas. I feel so alienated from her, and not because of this business about umbrella stands, of course. Not even because of her cracks about our baptism. She was upset, and when we're upset we don't know what we're saying. She said some harsh things, which I'd rather not repeat, but it's not that. Feeling

cut off from her goes much further back, all the way to my childhood. It's sad not to be able to love your own mother, and no matter how far back I try to remember, I find that I already didn't love her.

X You also act surprised that I didn't even mention what happened last week. I didn't write to you about it so as not to depress you, the same reason I haven't mentioned it to Lluís. It'd be better if you at the front didn't hear about these disgraces in the rear. And also because it made me feel lazy to have to tell you such disagreeable stuff, which after all no one can really make head or tail of . . . so lazy! Perhaps it's selfishness, but I would have preferred not to know anything about it. Sometimes I'd like to shut myself up in my house and not think about anything but Ramonet and Lluís--and you too, of course---just think about my own life and block out this insane world around us. Since we can't do anything to make it better . . . It was another bloodbath like the one last July. They say five hundred men died. We spent some rough days in shelters in Vallvidrera crammed in with other families fleeing Pedralbes. From Pedralbes ^{we'd hear} ~~we could hear~~ the rifle shots and cannons far away, downtown, but we didn't know what was going on. Then shells began falling in our neighborhood, but we didn't know who was firing them. Some neighbors who always know everything said it was an enemy battleship that was shelling us to spread ^{more} ~~more~~ panic. Later we found out that it was the anarchists. They'd gotten their hands on a big field gun and were firing it without knowing how to aim it. Some other neighbors said some acquaintances of theirs who had a house in Vallvidrera had had some bomb shelters dug in their yard at the beginning of the war and that if we wanted to go we'd all fit and be welcome. I wasn't sure whether to leave our house and go live in a shelter. At that point one of the big shells fell right in the vacant lot behind our house, the same one where we found

that old priest. The explosion was so tremendous that it blew out all the windows. That put an end to my doubts, and the three of us--the kid, the maid, and I--set out for Vallvidrera.

We stayed in that shelter for four or five days. I didn't know how I was going to get food for Ramonet and the maid. Barcelona had turned into hell again. Sometimes I even felt angry at the maid, poor girl, at having an extra mouth to feed when Ramonet's ~~is~~ already such a problem. Who needs a maid, I thought, when we've gone back to living like cavemen? But I can't get rid of her. She's from a village in Galicia, her whole family is in fascist territory; I can't just tell her to go home. The nights were cold and damp in those shelters, and it was hard sleeping on the ground. I told myself Lluís must never sleep any other way, always on the ground out in the open. Poor Lluís; I wonder if sometimes the fault wasn't mine, if I haven't been too harsh with him at times. We need so badly to be understood and forgiven . . . But I don't need to tell you this; you must also sleep wherever you can, without even a shelter to protect you from the cold night air. How long this war is lasting! Barcelona is now calm again. It's very hard to figure out what happened. Basically, it was the anarchists' fault. Always the anarchists! Everyone's fed up with the anarchists. And you know what: the most fed up of all is my father.

May 15

After the days we spent in that shelter in Vallvidrera, I wake up some mornings astonished to find myself at home, in my warm, soft bed, in this spacious, cheerful house. It's like a while back, when I'd wake up astonished to be a Christian.

Yes, I woke up astonished to be a Christian, and that was before my baptism. I felt Christian, I felt it in the depths of my soul at the moment

of waking. And yet, what did it mean to be a Christian? Will I still feel that way when the Church emerges from the catacombs? Will I manage to recognize Jesus beneath the disguises in which they'll inevitably clothe Him? It was so hard to recognize Him last July and August, when they pushed Him along, in rags, wearing a crown of thorns, His face covered with blood and spittle, toward Camp de la Bóta or the Rabassada highway to finish Him off with a pistol. How could I not be furious on His behalf and full of sympathy, when for two thousand years He's been dragging the cross of our miseries down all the world's pathways? ^{Trying to evade} ~~Wishing to flee~~ Him, we choose the most roundabout paths, the ones that seem to lead us farthest from Him, and even there we find His footprints!

Lluís is incapable of suspecting that I'm a Christian, and you caught on so quickly! Yes, you realized a long time ago that I couldn't stand the void, that I needed to believe. "There's a kind of optimism that's nothing more than vegetable unawareness," you once said, commenting on the incomprehensible self-assurance of certain atheists.

We were talking about total atheists, so rare in reality. I've hardly known any, with the possible exception of my brother Llibert--and even then I wouldn't swear ^{to} it. Who knows what's hidden inside him? What can we know about other people, when we scarcely know anything about ourselves? My own mother, who thinks she's such an atheist: why would she get so upset talking about religion if she were a total atheist? How could we hate something so much if we didn't believe in it in some strange way?

It was before I met Lluís in December 1930. You and I used to take endless walks along the ^a ~~Rambles~~ or down those narrow streets in the old part of town. We'd stop at a health ^a ~~food~~ store at the foot of the ^a ~~Rambles~~, buy two whole-wheat rolls, and get two slices of cheese at another store.

X
X
When I think of those shop windows, full of all kinds of good things to eat . . . We'd slowly stroll up the Rambles^a, munching our cheese sandwiches. By the time we reached Canaletes, we'd^{have} finished them and would order hard cider at a stand. I remember that mixture of flavors: whole-wheat bread; cheese; and cool, tangy cider, which were the flavors of our walks together. I remember them so vividly that I can taste them right now, as though I'd just eaten the bread and cheese and drunk one of those big glasses of cider. Will such good things ever come back again? At the time, I'd joined the Women's Sporting Club, and some mornings, if I had a free hour between classes, I'd head for the Saint Sebastian^{Pou} Baths and go swimming. I remember it now because I remember how much you disliked my joining and the fact that I enjoyed swimming. Why did you dislike it? I never could understand, and even now I don't get it. What was the harm in it? And anyhow, why should it matter to you? Back then, every December there was a race across the harbor. I took part in it for the first time in 1930, shortly before all that fun at the university, which was how I met Lluís. So at the time I still didn't know him.

While I was swimming I didn't feel the cold, because before the race we'd rubbed our bodies^{down} with grease, which afterward we washed off with hot showers. After the race, I still had time to get to my last class. At the entrance to the university, I found you arguing with a bunch of students. You were discussing the rumors that were flying around, rumors of a military coup to proclaim a republic and other exciting news: so exciting that I never did get to class. I stayed to talk with you. And as I stood out in the street, I began to feel cold and you noticed that I was shivering. It was then that I told you I'd been in the race.

"Are you crazy?" you asked. "A race across the harbor? In the middle of December?"

X I started laughing, told you how much fun that race had been, and enthusiastically described the boy who'd won it, "a real muscle man! With every stroke . . ." You ^{wouldn't} ~~didn't~~ even let me finish! "Is that what you admire? Brute force?" No; I didn't admire brute force. I've never admired it. But the sight of a great swimmer slicing through the water like a ^{porpoise} ~~dolphin~~ has always fascinated me. The more I tried to explain, the angrier you got. Why did it irritate you so much that I liked to swim and admired those who did it ^{well} ~~better than me~~?

X You're very intelligent, Juli. I've always said so and I don't mind saying it again. But you've always had some strange attitudes. Puzzled and worried, I ~~tried~~ to understand why it bothered you so much that I'd been in that race and enjoyed watching the winner. Later, when I'd forgotten all about it, you told me your aunt had forbidden you to swim in the sea even though you spent your summers on the coast, and that as a result you'd never learned to swim. That made me think what had annoyed you was that I admired in another a skill that you lacked, but isn't that a very childish reaction? No one can be good at everything. You had the greatest gift of all, intelligence. How could you envy another whose gift was so insignificant compared to yours?

You're very intelligent, Juli. You're the most intelligent person I've ever known. You're so far above that champion swimmer that it would be ridiculous to compare you. That champion, so admirable in the water, out of it was nothing more than a dolt one felt sorry for . . . Wasn't that another reason to admire him while he was swimming, poor guy, since it was the only thing he could do well? You're very intelligent, Juli, but sometimes--excuse me for saying so--you act as if you weren't.

Lluís's uncle is the exact opposite: he's not very bright but sometimes he seems to be. Within a few hours of our meeting, he'd

guessed that I was a Christian--when Lluís still hasn't the faintest inkling!

Now I can write to you about it without worrying about getting him in trouble. Till now I was afraid someone might read my letters. I finally

X heard, through the International Red Cross, that he's safe in Italy after a long odyssey, ~~moving and having to hide from one hideout to another~~ ^{hiding out with some others} in the mountains. So now I can

tell you all about it: at last I met this famous uncle, whom Lluís had always described so contemptuously.

2X He's a lovely person, and I can tell you this from first-hand experience because ^{he} I spent many weeks hiding ^g him in my house.

It's very odd, this tendency Lluís has to hold a grudge against everyone who cares about him: against me, for example. Because his uncle loves him far more than he realizes.

It was toward the end of October, three months after you and Lluís had set out for Madrid (in his case) and the Aragonese front (in yours). One Saturday morning, the maid came to say a militiaman from the patrols wanted to speak with me. I went to the front door, where I found a man I didn't recognize, short and round-faced, with a workman's cap pulled over his eyes and a red and black kerchief that hid part of his face, shabbily dressed, wearing rope-soled sandals.

"Excuse me for introducing myself like this. I'm your . . . husband's uncle."

He'd hesitated to say "husband," like the priest who had baptized us. I showed him into the living room and asked him to sit down. He apologized for having to tell me a "long and complicated story." At the beginning of the revolution, he said, nothing had changed at his factory thanks to a committee made up of the cashier, the main foreman, the oldest employees, and some of the most skilled workers. The first decision of this "workers' council" had been to elect a "comrade in charge." They'd

voted--not just by a majority but unanimously, he proudly told me--for him, since they considered him the best qualified to run the firm. Thus, in his position as "comrade in charge" and supported by the committee, he'd continued to administer his business with no more problems than those caused by the general situation: scarcity of raw materials, disruption of transport, loss of markets in the center, west, and south of Spain. But a couple of weeks ago, a bunch of anarchist agitators had stirred up the workers, and the unskilled ones, who were the majority, had ousted the skilled ones from the committee. The guy now in charge had previously worked in the warehouse--"a kind of gorilla," Uncle Eusebi said, who couldn't even ^{write} sign his name and had to ^{sign with thumb,} leave his fingerprint instead, "apparently from Medellín."

"Like Hernán Cortés!" I exclaimed.

"Exactly. Like Hernán Cortés," he replied. "Did Hernán Cortés also sign with his thumbprint? At this point, I'd believe anything. This Hernán Cortés of soup noodles turned out to be a nasty character, and his first ukase was to fire me. He started yelling that ^{d'd better not} I ~~didn't~~ have to set foot in that factory again ^{and} ~~because~~ they didn't need me for anything. So I was spending my days at home, resigned to being bored stiff, when this morning the cashier--in whom I have complete confidence--phoned to warn me that the new anarchist boss had shown up at the office in a worse mood than usual, saying business was going badly since I'd left because I was sabotaging it from the outside and that they'd have to 'get rid of me' along with the rest of the Catalan bourgeoisie . . . 'As long as one of them's alive,' he'd said, 'we won't be able to straighten out this country's industry.'"

Uncle Eusebi has a round, sweet-natured face, but from time to time a nervous tic makes him blink his small, bright eyes rapidly. This happens

especially when he's about to make one of his wisecracks, which can sometimes be quite ^{surprising} ~~shocking~~, and when this happens, he always stumbles over the first few words.

"Y-you can tell how much they know about ~~straightening out~~ industries in Extremadura! If Hernán Cortés had been able to make a living in Medellín, why the devil would he have run off to seek his fortune in Paraguay?"

"And as for you, uncle: why the devil did you decide to hide out at my house?"

"Well, you see: I couldn't figure out where to go. You're the only anarchists I know. And besides . . . I was dying to meet you. I'm the nosy type, you know? Is that a crime?"

Meanwhile, the maid had dressed Ramonet, since it was time for him to get up, and she brought him in, washed and with his hair neatly combed. He'd just turned three. To my great surprise, since he's usually shy with strangers, he ran straight to our visitor, stopped in front of him, and examined him.

"Who is this gentleman?"

"Uncle Eusebi."

"Yes, sonny, I'm your uncle," he said, taking him on his knee. "To think I had such a little rascal for a nephew and hadn't even met him! Is that right, Trini? Am I such a monster that Lluís should treat me like this? You can see how this kid came running as soon as he saw me and how happy he is on my knee. ^{Out of the mouth of babes} ~~The voice of innocence!~~ What did you say his name is? Ramonet? I have to tell you that when Lluís was a kid, only six or seven months old, when I tried to pick him up he screamed bloody murder. How the little devil howled! He was only six months old, and he already couldn't stand the sight of me! It's because he's an aristocrat and

I'm a plebian, you know? I've got 'Ruscalleda' written all over me . . ."

I started laughing. "I assume you're joking. How could a six-month-old baby . . ."

"Joking? Not entirely. Not entirely, Trini. I've seen so many strange things in my life. Sometimes I even suspect that people like him are born with their prejudices, which they can't get rid of. They still have them even when they can't remember them and aren't even aware of them. I could tell you about all kinds of unexpected incidents and strange reactions . . ."

"In that case, Lluís would have it in for me even more than you. I'm even more plebian."

He stared at me in amazement, and his eyelashes began to flutter.

"You think that because you and your family are anarchists . . .? Not even if you spent your whole lives tossing bombs into crowds . . . Bombs don't make one less aristocratic; quite the contrary! On the other hand, manufacturing spaghetti and macaroni is the kiss of death. From a geneological point of view, my crimes can never be expiated. Not only do I manufacture spaghetti and macaroni, but all kinds of other pasta, pastina, and semolina. Semolina! Did you ever hear anyone say Geoffrey of Bouillon set up a soup noodle factory in the Holy Land, however much his name might suggest it? Honey, I'm the kind of man who, when I get too dressed up, when I put on a tuxedo, ^{people} ~~they~~ always ^{think I'm a} ~~take me for the~~ waiter . . . These kinds of crimes can never be pardoned!"

After thinking it over awhile, I decided he should sleep in the maid's room, because it's on the top floor, cut off from the rest of the house.

The maid would sleep with Ramonet. We told the boy that the "gentleman" had just paid a visit and, when the visit was over, he'd gone home again. So Lluís's uncle hid in my house for five or six weeks without ^{Ramonet's} ~~the kid's~~

knowledge (besides, a few days later Ramonet began attending nursery school). We took his meals up to him, and often, when the boy was taking his afternoon nap or had gone to bed at night, I'd eat lunch or supper with him and keep him company, for which he was very grateful, since he was bored stiff in his seclusion. He talked a lot about Lluís, always affectionately though sarcastically. "Lluís gets annoyed at how important I think I am because I run a soup-noodle factory, but honey, if I didn't act important, who else would think I was?" He made a lot of jokes like that, which made me laugh and would have disarmed anyone but Lluís. "Lluís? You know what I think? All that stuff about living with you without getting married was just to shock his family. No doubt about it! He acts like a proletarian, a rebel, but I spent thirteen or fourteen hours a day in that factory and he only showed up once a year, to collect his dividends." He told me lots of things I didn't know.

"As his guardian, I could have forbidden Lluís to move in with you because he was still a minor. He was only twenty years old. I considered using this weapon, not to keep him from living with you--which would have been inexcusable, since you were already pregnant--but to force him to get married. I realized you and he would both refuse to have a Church wedding, but a civil one at least . . . Whatever Father Gallifa might say, I think a couple with a civil marriage is more respectable than one that's unmarried. Father Gallifa got that idea out of my head. 'A civil marriage is nothing,' he said. 'It's not worth getting in an argument over something so trivial.' After all, I thought, a year from now Lluís will be twenty-one, able to do exactly as he likes, so let him do it now. Why should I try to stop him? And Father Gallifa said I'd made the right decision."

Father Gallifa is a Jesuit Lluís mentioned occasionally. I think he was a teacher at his school. In any case, as far as I can make out, the family

adores him and Uncle Eusebi asks his advice in ticklish situations like this one. Come to think of it, if this Father Gallifa taught at the Jesuit school, you must have known him too. How is it, then, that you never mentioned him? You and Lluís were classmates at the Jesuit school in Sarrià. Maybe I'm getting confused and actually Father Gallifa never taught at a school but said Mass at the church Lluís attended. Anyhow, while Lluís's uncle was telling me all this, the phone rang. It was the cashier. Once he'd made sure I was Trini, he asked to speak to Uncle Eusebi. It must have been after ten. The cashier was phoning from his house, not from the factory.

When they'd finished talking, Uncle Eusebi told me as he hung up the receiver, trying to hold back his laughter, "You know what he just said? That the 'comrade in charge,' that gorilla from Medellín, says he wants me to come back because he doesn't know how to pay the men their weekly wages and tomorrow's Saturday. Did you know that not long ago an ^{eat} ~~help-wanted~~ ad appeared in Publicity: 'Collectivized company seeks capitalist partner.' I saw it with my own eyes. I've subscribed to Publicity ^{eat} for years. Guaranteed genuine! They must be having the same problem: they've realized that paying wages every week isn't as easy as they thought."

Poor Uncle Eusebi! One day when he was in a confiding mood, he ^a told me something that really surprised me. It [^] was also at night, we'd eaten supper, and I'd stayed to keep him company as I usually did. I'd brought my knitting with me. I'd started work on those two thick sweaters, one for you and one for Lluís, since winter was coming on and the war hadn't ended. Do you remember how we were so sure, at the beginning, that the war couldn't last more than a few weeks or at most a few months? And with the passing weeks and months, it was already November. So I was

knitting in the upstairs bedroom and having those long talks with Uncle Eusebi. And that evening, talking about one thing and another, he unexpectedly started telling me about his daughter Julieta and how he'd hoped to marry her to Lluís. It must be true what they say about mutual attractions. I'd liked him right from the first minute I'd seen him, and I knew he felt the same way about me. And that's why, since we'd taken such a liking to each other, he could share such an unexpected confidence and tell such a surprising family story without offending me in the least.

"I'd have liked Lluís to marry Julieta, my daughter. So what if they're first cousins? That's what papal dispensations are for! With money, you can arrange anything! As you know, a big hunk of Son of Rusalleda's stock went to the Brothers Hospitalers, thanks to Ramon's whims. If at least Lluís's share could stay in the family! There's no point kidding myself about my son, Josep Maria. I don't know if Lluís ever mentioned him . . ."

Yes, he'd mentioned him in the cruelest way. It seems that his cousin suffers from a severe glandular deficiency, congenital, and has been hideously obese since childhood. Uncle Eusebi told me they'd tried all sorts of treatments, consulted all sorts of doctors, visited all sorts of spas: in vain. A little older than Lluís, almost Ramon's age, this Josep Maria apparently has the intelligence of an eighteen-month-old infant.

"And he's a good boy, Trini, a good boy! But what can I do? So my only hope of passing the business on to someone in the family was Lluís. Why are you making that face? Does it surprise you to think I hoped Lluís would take over? You're still very young, Trini, and I'm a wise old fox. I've seen so many things in my life . . . It wouldn't surprise me a bit if Lluís, once he settled down, worked like a demon and ended up being one of the biggest noodle manufacturers in Europe. I know he can do it if he

wants to."

As you can imagine, this prophesy made me burst out laughing.

"Don't laugh, don't. I've seen less likely cases. Now you'll understand what a disappointment it was for me and my wife--especially for my wife--when he got involved with you. But what could we do? Now that I know you, I feel a ^{little} ~~bit~~ more resigned."

And since his face expressed this resignation, so antagonistic to me, I laughed again.

"Don't laugh; listen to what I'm saying. As soon as I laid eyes on you, I realized you were nothing like what my wife and I had imagined. Basically, I've come to see you're a sensible girl. Believe me, honey: I've always had my feet on the ground. There are stormy times, but sooner or later the storm will pass. Nothing tires people out as much as constant turmoil and anxiety. When calm returns, put some order in your life. A lady living with a man who's not her husband doesn't inspire respect. You don't want to be insulted by women who are far beneath you. Because it's the women who'll eat you alive; men are more tolerant. Well, everyone needs to be respected; we need respect as much as bread. It's you who have to set Lluís on the right track. It may be hard, I won't deny it, but you'll succeed if you ^{put} ~~set~~ your mind to it. Yes, it'll be hard. You don't have to tell me. These Brocàs aren't like other people, I mean like you and me. You have to remember that his father was a lieutenant. What a fuss there was in my house when my sister--may she rest in peace--got engaged to him. We Rusalledas have always worked like ants. My grandfather manufactured semolina in Agramunt (which is where my family's from), and you ^{could} ~~can~~ say none of us has ever looked up from his work and his ledgers. And all of a sudden the girl married an infantry lieutenant without a penny to his name, however aristocratic it might be

and however many oil portraits he might have of his grandfather in dress uniform. My sister was older than me, and her name was Sofia. After all these years, I can still tell you it was terrifying to see how crazy she was about that lieutenant! I believe that if our father had forbidden her to see him, she would have thrown herself off our balcony, and in those days we lived on the sixth floor. It was impossible to change her mind. They got married, had Ramon--who's now a Brother Hospitaller--and then Lluís. When Lluís was just a few months old, my brother-in-law was killed in Morocco at the head of his company; they'd promoted him to captain in the meantime. They promoted him posthumously to major and gave him a medal for distinguished service. Sofia died of a broken heart shortly thereafter. You could see she wouldn't last long without her husband.

X Women find those Brocàs irresistible! They're all gallant lads, brave, impetuous, great talkers, but common sense? They haven't the slightest idea! Well, from what I've observed, you have more common sense than I would have imagined. So it's you who, once things calm down again, have to gradually steer him onto the right path without his noticing, because it's plain to see you can lead him by the nose."

X "Uncle Eusebi," I replied, "do you want me to ^{make} ^{move} ~~turn~~ him into a bourgeois?"

"Well, if you want to put it that way . . . If getting married as God says we should and doing what everyone else with half a brain does means being bourgeois . . . What's the use of all this free-love nonsense? To make other people look down on you: that's all it amounts to. And a woman needs to be respected. She needs it even more than men do. You've seen that for yourself. Now that I know you, I'm sure you'll want to be as respected as any respectable lady on earth, and you'll know how to keep an eye on the factory (a fourth of it's yours, I mean Lluís's, and a fourth

X you ^{won't} wouldn't end up attending shareholder meetings in his place (as you know, he never sets foot in them); and maybe if you did, you strike me as someone who'd take more and more of an interest in the business as you got to know how it works. Who knows . . . Maybe if Lluís refused, you'd end up being that hardworking, level-headed partner I've so often wished I had (because believe me, it's hard having to run a huge factory like ours is getting to be); the partner Ramon could have been if he hadn't joined the Brothers Hospitalers . . ."

And after this long and unexpected lecture, he suddenly exclaimed, even more unexpectedly, "Is it a crime to manufacture noodles?"

X No; it's not a crime. Uncle Eusebi is quite right. Don't we eat noodles? Of course we eat them, or rather we used to . . . And how good they tasted! If I could find a box of the ones they sold at the corner grocery store . . . I can just see them now . . . Though when it comes to noodles, I don't know who was more unjust: you or Lluís. I remember one of our sessions at Blast when the two of you made so many cracks about the noodle industry that my father had to call you to order. After the revolution, he said, there would still be noodle factories, but they'd be workers' cooperatives instead of capitalist enterprises. Aside from that, there'd be no difference. The more noodles, the better. They're an excellent source of proletarian nutrition. You interrupted him, "If there will still be noodle factories after anarchy is proclaimed, we might as well give up!"

X You ~~certainly~~ ^g had a great time making fun of my father's good faith.

Once Ramonet started attending nursery school, Uncle Eusebi didn't have to spend so much time cooped up in his room. He could walk around

the house. "I'm dying of curiosity," he said, "to see how you've fixed it up. This house," he added, though of course I already knew, "used to belong to my sister, poor Sofia, may she rest in peace."

"I've never been in a house run by an anarchist," he added, laughing.

X When he saw that big old ^{ivory} ~~marble~~ crucifix in my bedroom, he was stunned. It was then that he said those words that stuck in my memory, "You see, I'm not a heroic Christian. I burned all my prints and images. The patrols could have shown up at any moment, and they're a nasty bunch. I burned everything except the Sacred Heart. I didn't dare. Instead, I carefully buried it in the yard. You see, my life was at stake. I wasn't born to be a martyr!"

He'd seen the living room the day he'd arrived, since that was where I'd received him, but he'd been too nervous to pay much attention. Now he stood there, enchanted.

"Honey, you've got much better taste than my wife. It's true that's not hard to do, since poor Carmeta, who's such a good woman in so many respects, has no taste at all. When she was a girl, she learned to play the piano and weave tapestries, so the walls of our apartment are covered with her artwork. The most spectacular ones are in the living room:

X the Virgin Mary as a Good Shepherd
there's one depicting the ~~Divina Pastora~~ surrounded by lambs, another with the prodigal son feeding swine, and a third, a real knockout, depicting
X some camels trying to get through that famous 'eye of ^a the needle,' since
according to the Jesuits, it wasn't the eye of a real needle but the name of one of the gates to Jerusalem. Did you ever hear of anyone using this
X parable as the subject ^{for} of a work of art? Well, Carmeta had the courage to do it, despite her youth; she wove the tapestry with the camels before we got married. I suspect that her father--that is, my father-in-law--put her up to it. Since he was loaded with dough, he was worried about that

X camel-and-eye-of-the^a needle business. That's the story with the tapestries.

X As far as the piano is concerned, Carmeta could play ^{a few simple tunes.} Vals and Funambula.

X She tries so hard. She's so sweet and simple-minded. Once she visited my office (years ago; she's hardly set foot in it since) and it made her sad to see how cold and bare it was. 'I'll fix it up,' she said. 'I'll cheer this ^{place} office up.' And to cheer it up, she gave me an enormous sofa with two big armchairs, all upholstered in black leather. Then, to make the place even cheerier, she put a bust of Dante on top of my filing cabinet."

"What does Dante have to do with soup noodles?"

"Maybe because he was Italian . . . I'd have preferred that statue of General Prim on horseback, the one that was in Ciutadella Park till the anarchists knocked it down; I mean a plaster reproduction of it. Not that General Prim has more to do with noodles than Dante, but at least he was one of us. He was from Reus, General Prim! You know, I've always had a soft spot for General Prim; so liberal, so valiant . . . We could sure use him today!"

So many weeks had passed that we'd forgotten he was in danger. We thought he could just stay in my house till the war was over, especially since at the time we still thought it wouldn't last long, at most until February (I don't really know why we'd fixed on that date, February, for the end of the war). A few weeks before Christmas, a patrol showed up unexpectedly at the front gate.

While I tried to keep them occupied on the ground floor, the maid rushed upstairs to warn Uncle Eusebi. In the end, everything turned out all right. Luckily, I still hadn't hung up that oil painting of Colonel Brocà, so the only object that could annoy them was the crucifix in the bedroom. They couldn't agree about it. Some wanted to take it down and "throw it in the garbage," while others insisted that "Christ was an anarchist hanged

X by the bourgeoisie." While this controversy raged, ^{Lluís's} my uncle had time to hide in the maid's wardrobe, and she had time to gather up everything in her room that suggested a man's presence: ashtrays, socks, pajamas, shoes. When the patrol got there, after searching the rest of the house, it looked so much like a genuine maid's room when they glanced in at the door that they didn't even bother to go in,.

But it still gave us a big scare. We decided it was unwise for him to stay in Barcelona. On December 19th or 20th, 1936, we said goodbye. Poor Uncle Eusebi, he was almost in tears, and he's not the weepy kind. "I'm very glad to have met you, Trini. I'll tell you the truth: my wife and I had no idea you were so nice. I'm delighted, and . . . thanks for everything you've done."

X Months went by before I heard from him. All I knew was that he was hiding in the woods in La Garrotxa and Les Guilleries, along with others in the same predicament. Getting out of the country, which had been relatively easy at the beginning of the war, had become harder and harder. The patrols kept a sharp eye on the mountain passes leading to France. I worried about Uncle Eusebi, because to tell you the truth, I'd grown fond of him. I also hadn't imagined he was "so nice," as he put it. How could I have imagined him from Lluís's grotesque caricatures? Of course, at times he does say some silly things, but is that a crime? It's no more of a crime than manufacturing noodles. When he realized I was attending Mass, he exclaimed, "^{Secret} ~~Underground~~ Masses! They must seem like cell meetings!" And another day he said, "Your Lluís always called me a hypocrite, but only a saint isn't a hypocrite sometimes." He adores Father Coloma's novels and told me he'd bought them all in a single volume: "His Complete Works, you know? Father Coloma's Complete Works. There's no one like Father Coloma." "But he's so superficial . . ." "Father Coloma, superficial? Why,

X
that book cost me ten duros!" Another day, he said some suprising things about Lluís, or did I already tell you ~~about them?~~ I get confused with these letters . . . "Maybe you won't believe me, Trini," he said, "but I have a lot more faith in Lluís than in Josep Maria. Lluís will change as he grows older. Josep Maria will always stay the same, and believe me, I hate to say this about my own son. Lluís is still trying things on for size. Poor Trini, he's going to make you suffer before you finally tame him. But he'll get over it in a few years, and when he does, he'll find that manufacturing noodles has its attractions." When I replied that I couldn't believe Lluís would ever take an interest in the factory, Uncle Eusebi insisted, "Never say 'never.' I've seen some amazing transformations." That's when he uttered that improbable prophesy, "It wouldn't surprise me a bit if he ended up being one of the biggest noodle manufacturers in Europe."

2X
His letter from Italy took a few months to reach me, after following a tortuous route through several countries, including ~~the~~ Tangier Zone and the ~~Principality~~ of Monaco. And it's ~~as if~~ I could still see his contrite expression, like that of a kid who's done something naughty . . . "I'm not a heroic Christian. I wasn't born to be a martyr!" Didn't Saint Peter deny Christ three times? How moving I find Jesus's indulgence of this flaw that we young people refuse to forgive: cowardice. I hate it when I recall that young priest's energetic expression . . . so much self confidence, so much conviction, so much energy--it all repels me. He was so ready to be a martyr that it makes me worry that . . . O God, don't let today's martyrs become tomorrow's hangmen! Some people give the impression of being as ready to suffer martyrdom under one regime as to inflict it under another. Between that priest's expression and Uncle Eusebi's, I'll take Uncle Eusebi's any day!

May 16

X Now that the boy's ^{at} in nursery school all day, time weighs on my hands. He started going in the morning when Uncle Eusebi was at my house, and it's remarkable how he wracked his little brain--he'd just turned three--to find reasons for not attending. Since the idea of going didn't appeal to him at all, I'd bought him a fancy, brand-new schoolboy's satchel. "You see, it's a big boy's satchel. You're still too young to have a satchel like this one, but when you start nursery school you'll be a big boy and I'll give it to you." That made a big impression on him. From time to time he'd ask me to show it to him. He'd look at it respectfully and ask, "It's for going to nursery school, right?" And a minute later he'd ask, "Big boys can't go to nursery school without satchels, right?" And again, "Little boys without satchels can't go to nursery school. Without satchels they're too little, right?" Certain I'd done the right thing, I answered, "No; they can't go. They're still too little. But soon you'll be a big boy and go to nursery school with your satchel."

The great day arrived and . . . his satchel had disappeared! The satisfied look on his face as he watched me hunt for it gave him away. He'd hidden it, convinced that without a satchel he couldn't go to nursery school. When I told him that with or without a satchel, he was going to go anyway, he threw the biggest tantrum in his life. "I don't want to go! I don't want to go!" The maid had to drag him there. As she dragged him away, holding onto his hand, he turned and looked at me with an imploring expression that broke my heart, but I'd made up my mind to be implacable. Hours later, I found it in the nesting box in that henhouse at the end of the backyard: an abandoned henhouse, unused since Lluís's mother died (Sofia, Uncle Eusebi's sister). The satchel was covered with

dead leaves heaped on the nesting box that made me suspect it was there.

At lunchtime I asked if he'd liked nursery school, if it was fun. "A little bit," he admitted. "And the teacher, isn't she pretty?" "A little bit." "And the other kids?" "Some of them are okay." "So you liked it?" "No, I didn't." "But you'll go back tomorrow, right?" Then he came out with one of those disconcerting replies kids often give. With a resigned look on his face, he sighed, "What choice do I have?"

Since then he's gradually gotten to like it, and recently the teacher suggested that I let him go in the afternoons too. It's a very cheerful school, with a cage like a little house full of parakeets in the backyard and a big goldfish bowl in the classroom. All they do is play while the teacher keeps an eye on them. She's very young, very fond of kids, and very active. It's not Ramonet I'm worried about. He's delighted to spend all day there. It's that all of a sudden, without him around, I've realized how little I have to do. The empty hours seem to crawl by . . . *Besides* ~~Except for~~ *shopping for rationed food* ~~rationament~~ (hours standing on line for a couple of pounds of lentils or three ounces of sugar, when there is any), I don't know what to do. I sit in my armchair, stare out the window, and write to you--it makes me feel so much less alone to write to you for hours on end--or I surrender to *endless* daydreams, reliving the past as I gaze off into the distance, stirring up forgotten memories like the sediment at the bottom of a well from which surprising objects emerge: objects I thought had vanished forever.

I know this pleasure in rummaging through my deepest memories is unhealthy, and I'd get over it if I had more to do. But what can a housewife do when her only child is at school all day? Before, she would sew, knit, knead dough, bake bread and not only wash clothes but also make soap and bleach. All this filled her life, lending meaning to every

hour, every day, every year. Sometimes I'm so sick of doing nothing that I even envy my great-great-grandmother in her farmhouse at Forques de Mont-ral. Did I ever tell you about that farmhouse?

It was Lluís's idea to go there. I only knew that it was my grandfather's birthplace. At the age of twelve, he came to Barcelona to seek his fortune and never set foot in that house again. He considered himself the victim of an injustice because the lands hadn't been divided equally among the brothers (he was the youngest of thirteen), and there was another reason why he didn't want to go back: they're Carlists in Forques.

s. I X It was at the beginning of our relationship, those months that now seem like a dream. We went on long trips together, just the two of us. I didn't have to lie to my parents. After all, there's some use in their being anarchists. It was Lluís who had to think up elaborate excuses, trips with groups led by his economics professor and other nonsense of the sort. Sometimes we'd spend three days up in the mountains. We'd sleep wherever we found ourselves when the sun went down, in some farmhouse's straw loft if they didn't have a spare bed. We told people we were married, always provoking the same exclamation, "But you're so young!" He was eighteen and I was fifteen, but we added four or five years to our ages when they asked us questions.

X What an exciting time to be alive, that spring of 1931! Will we ever see another like it? You, Lluís, I, and all the revolutionary students were outside the Generalitat on that afternoon, April 14th, when Colonel Macià proclaimed the Catalan Republic. ^{The} That old colonel, veteran of so many conspiracies, had such white hair and poetic eyes, which filled with tears every time he came out on the balcony to greet the crowd filling the Plaça de Sant Jaume. We were all brothers in those days, when there were

2X only Catalans in Barcelona. The sight of that mane of white hair and the colors on that flag, which had belonged to all of us for centuries, had ^{walked} ~~created~~ a miracle. How it ^{fluttered} ~~flapped~~ in the spring breeze! What joy in everyone's eyes, as that flag made us all feel like one big family! What a glorious day: that April 14th!

The whole country smelled of flowering thyme, of earth thawing after a long winter. And we, so young and free, felt that by simply coming into the world we'd been able to change it! It was the glory of an April day, but at the time we had no idea that it would be so uncertain. Who would have thought all that excitement would lead, five years later, to senseless butchery? . . . You were the only one who foresaw it, but we paid no attention to what you said!

X When summer came, Lluís, for the first time in his life, refused to spend it in Calderetes with his aunt and cousins. He said he had to stay in Barcelona and get on with his research ^{at} ~~in~~ the library--research on economics, of course, since the two of you always used the economics professor, whom neither of you could stand, as a smokescreen for your families. We hiked through Les Guilleries, Andorra, Cadí, Alta Ribagorça, and God knows where else! When I met Lluís, I'd never been outside Barcelona, and I was delighted to discover those peaks covered with snow all year round, those fir and beech woods, those herds of mares in Pyrenean meadows. The universe was new, everything was a surprise--from the cuckoo's song in the depths of ^{forests} ~~groves~~ to the flowering narcissus in Montseny's fens. I was discovering the universe, and it was wonderful to discover it arm in arm with Lluís.

X One day he suggested that we visit the mountains around Prades and stop in at Forques. It was his idea; it never would have occurred to me. The only thing I knew was that my grandfather had been born there; that

X was the only thing they'd mentioned in my family. My father had never been curious to visit that house where his own father had been born. In fact, he wasn't curious about anything farther away than Les Planes. My grandfather, once he'd settled in Barcelona at the age of twelve, never left. He'd started working for the streetcar company when they still used horses, and once they'd converted to electricity, he got a job as a driver and kept ~~at~~ ^{it} until he died. There were no vacations back then, and even if he'd had time off, I doubt that he would have spent it visiting the farmhouse.

He'd always hated it.

X So the idea of going was truly Lluís's. We plunged into steep gorges covered with pines and yew trees, following mountain streams that cascaded from one crag to another. There were no roads wide enough for wagons, and there were barely trails for horses. Once we got lost and ended up spending the night in a farmhouse where an old man had died the year before without ever seeing a wheel. When ~~he~~ ^{he'd} realized he was dying, he'd asked them to go down to Reus and buy him a chocolate bar. He didn't want to leave this world without tasting it at least once. It was late September, and they were busy harvesting hazelnuts. Men and women, young and old, everyone from the surrounding farmhouses was gathering hazelnuts and stuffing them in sacks. We asked a ninety-year-old woman if the harvest had been good and she replied, "It's hardly ever been as good as this. We've filled more than six sacks. Tomorrow, the boy will take them down to Reus on a mule." Then she stopped short, as though pondering an insoluble enigma, and asked, "Who in the world could eat so many hazelnuts?"

We found Forques on a kind of plateau atop a mountain range. From the yard, we could see the entire countryside around Tarragona, all the

way to the sea. The farmhouse is very humble, as we'd expected, but it has so much charm! It's like a farmhouse in a nativity scene, with rough-hewn stones and a low green and yellow roof covered with black patches of moss and every variety of lichen. You wouldn't think it was man-made, it looks so natural. Its stones, originally yellowish and now blackened with age, blend into the cliffs around it. Lluís was enchanted. "If they ever want to sell it, I'll be glad to buy it. What a marvelous summer place!"

X Actually, I wasn't as ^{charme} ~~enchanted~~ as him. The idea that it was my "family seat," as he insisted, was new to me and I couldn't quite get used to it. That farmhouse was very pretty, but it was so primitive . . . We went in. Everyone was out harvesting hazelnuts, except for an old man warming himself by the fire.

X He was wearing breeches and a ^g ~~gorra~~ ^g gorra musca, which is a kind of purple stocking cap. I'd never seen anyone in that kind of cap except

X porters in Barcelona, who wear bright red ones. He rose from the ~~low~~ chair where he'd been sitting hunched over, stretching out his hands toward the fire. Standing up, he was strikingly tall and corpulent. His

X blueish eyes seemed clouded; later we learned that he had cataracts. He was eighty-nine years old, he told us, and had stopped doing outdoor work--not because of his age but because of his cataracts. He owned the farm and was my father's first cousin. My grandfather was more than twenty years younger than his eldest brother, and that's why that man was so much older than my father, who still hadn't reached sixty. While Lluís was telling him I was the granddaughter of one of his uncles and that he himself was my husband, the man nodded, as though trying to follow it all. "So your wife," he said, "is my uncle's granddaughter. And which one was he: Uncle Pere? I had twelve uncles in all, which made thirteen including my father. Thirteen boys; not a single girl. That's what

they've always told me. Many of them tried their luck down below, and some were never heard from again . . ." I thought that if there were thirteen of them and the farm was as rundown as it looked, how could my grandfather have objected to its not being divided into thirteen equal parts? How much could each of the thirteen have expected? Meanwhile Lluís was telling the old man that his forefathers had also been Carlists, that his great-grandfather had been Colonel Brocà, who had fought in the First Carlist War . . . If he'd recited some magic spell, the effect couldn't have been more immediate! The old man's jaw dropped and, upon hearing the name "Brocà," he raised his cloudy eyes heavenward and fervently exclaimed, "Damn that whore Maria Cristina!"

As he recalled his grandfather's times, the times when Colonel Brocà had campaigned, apparently around Prades and Montsant, the old man grew more and more excited. He blathered on and on, he embraced Lluís, he embraced me, and he repeated that surprising exclamation in a whisper--an exclamation that in his mouth, from the tone in which he uttered it and his way of gazing heavenward, was clearly pious in its intentions.

He insisted that we stay to supper and sleep over. Our bedroom was large, with a rough wooden floor--there were no tiled floors in that house--and walls that had never been painted. The bed was made of wooden planks laid across a frame, with a straw mattress on the planks and three others stuffed with wool on top of that. At the head of the bed hung a print of Saint Michael felling Lucifer. Lluís was fascinated by everything, more than I was. He pronounced the old man with the cataracts "a real character." "I can see you Milmanys are good, solid stock." I thought he was saying that because he was in love, that he glamorized everything connected with me at that time, but after hearing Uncle Eusebi's stories, I now believe that a farmhouse, however humble,

inhabited by an old Carlist who with every breath mentions the dubious virtue of a queen who died long ago is, from his point of view, infinitely more honorable than a soup-noodle factory.

The next morning, they invited us to have lunch with them in the woods, about two hours from their farmhouse. Lluís set out at daybreak with a dozen men and boys, all armed with shotguns. They were from Forques and five or six other nearby farms. Our arrival was a big event for everyone, since, as they told us, they could go for years without seeing a stranger. I left quite a bit later with the old man and his daughter-in-law. We were going to slowly make our way to the stream where they'd cook lunch, bringing everything that was needed in a basket. I was surprised to see the daughter-in-law packing nothing more than a big round loaf of bread, olive oil, a few heads of garlic, some salt, and a jug of wine. "But what's the main course going to be?" She laughed and replied, "They'll find plenty to eat in the woods."

By the time we reached the stream, they'd already killed almost two dozen rabbits. There was a spring nearby, hidden in a ravine with big slate rocks and lots of ferns. The daughter-in-law built a fire, and when it had burned enough to leave plenty of hot coals, she took some pieces of slate, oiled them generously, and placed them among the coals. Once they were good and hot, she spread the rabbits--skinned, cleaned, and well salted--on the slate. I stared at her as though I were watching the preparation of a paleolithic lunch, a genuine Stone Age meal! With the aioli the old man had made in a stone mortar while the rabbits were being grilled, I can't remember eating anything more delicious in my life. If you only knew how vividly I still recall that smell of ~~grilled~~ ^{grilled} rabbit and aioli. And what marvelous wine to wash it down with! Now, when everything's so hard to get in Barcelona . . . Some people say what we've gone through

so far is nothing compared to what's coming. Those next-door neighbors who always know everything say that from now on fascist planes from the Italian bases on Majorca are going to bomb us every night. Up till now they've shelled us mostly from battleships, and we've only rarely seen planes, "but from now on," the neighbors say, "we're really going to get it." They also say this war will last for years and that, in addition to being bombarded from the sea and air, there's going to be more and more hunger---that what we've seen so far is nothing. Actually, if things got that bad, if they bombed us all the time, if it got to be so hard to feed Ramonet . . . I'd take him and set out for Forques. I could help them, I'm sure they'd take me in, and if I worked hard I wouldn't be a burden on them.

But are they still alive? There have been some massacres of Carlists. My God, those dreadful massacres at Fatarella and Solivella, where people say not one man was left alive . . . The entire country shuddered, when it seemed ^{that} ~~like~~ after everything we'd seen nothing could make us shudder. Why all this hatred of Carlists, when all they wanted was to be left in peace in their farmhouses, with their memories of faded glories and forgotten wars they'd lost. As for me, I can't think of Carlism without recalling that giant of an eighty-nine-year-old man raising his cloudy eyes heavenward and fervently exclaiming, "Damn that whore Maria Cristina!" together with the aroma of ^{grilled rabbit, aioli, and ~~red~~ that red} ~~grilled rabbit, aioli~~ wine we drank from the jug and whose slight tartness made it even more refreshing, along with the sound of that brook flowing over its slate bed, surrounded by ferns . . . How vividly I remember all that, and how I long to show up there unexpectedly with Ramonet, fleeing this hunger and the bombs.

May 17

How mysterious I find those who can't see mystery anywhere. I mean doubters who can't imagine how anyone else can believe. We should pity them, like obnoxious children one wants to love but can't.

Fortunately, my father is nothing like that. He's a believer. It may be hard to grasp what he believes in, but he believes. Otherwise, how could you explain the life he's led? Blast . . . Do you remember when we used to sell it in the streets? We never managed to get anyone to buy a single copy.

That ill-starred weekly newspaper still comes out every Thursday. It's now filled with articles about "cannibals disguised as anarchists" and "jackals who dishonor the most humane of all social philosophies." "Jackals" is one of his pet terms, although I don't believe he has the remotest idea of what a jackal looks like. I don't think he could distinguish an owl from a magpie, and aside from pines, which everyone can recognize, I doubt that he could identify any other species of trees--my poor father, who was born and lives in the heart of the old part of Barcelona and has never left it except to spend an occasional Sunday in Les Planes, surrounded by greasy paper and empty sardine cans.

He must be thinking of Les Planes when he writes about nature in his articles for Blast: glorious nature, which would cure all the world's ills if we let it operate unfettered. My dear father would reduce the world's pharmacopeia to lemon, garlic, and onion. Though he's not a vegetarian, he's not far from it either, and if he's not altogether in agreement with nudists, it's because he still has some sense of the ridiculous.

That a person as harmless as my father could arouse such hatred in other anarchists . . . I don't know if you're aware that (some newspapers carried it, but I don't know if they reach the front) a few weeks ago

X 7 some thugs from Solidaridad Obrera attacked Blast's offices. ~~This was some~~
~~time ago,~~ before the events that took place earlier this month. Of course,
Blast's office is our apartment on Hospital Street. They took those piles of
back issues (the ones we couldn't sell) from our spare room and threw
them off the balcony. Fortunately, the police showed up in time to keep
them from going farther. The government itself advised my father and his
friends to arm themselves so they could repel any future attacks. "The
only arms I want are ideas," and they couldn't get him to change his mind.

A few weeks after you and Lluís set out for your two fronts, he
showed up one day at my house in a taxi, his face covered with blood. I
had quite a scare. Luckily, it was nothing serious. It was Cosme, his
lifelong friend, who'd brought him. Maybe you'll remember him: a short,
chubby guy with a pockmarked face, a lathe operator, who often attended
our secret meetings. Cosme is more on the side of Solidaridad Obrera, but
he's a great friend of my father's. He told me what had happened while I
washed my father's face with hydrogen peroxide. "Imagine," Cosme said.
"Imagine, Trini. Some anarchist volunteers were leaving for Madrid and my
grandson was among them. That's why I was at the train station. Between
the volunteers and those ^{who'd} ~~who had~~ come to see them off, the place was
jammed. All of a sudden I heard someone yelling at the top of his lungs,
'What are you doing, ^{fools} ~~idiots~~? Where are you going? To impose your ideas at
gunpoint? You've turned into soldiers? What about your principles?' They
came close to lynching him as an agent provocateur. It's a good thing I
spotted him! I had a hard time dragging him away. He refused to come. He
was so worked up that I don't even think he recognized me. As I dragged
him out of the station, he was still shouting, 'To defend Madrid? The
octopus that sucks our blood?'"

My father kept silent as I cleaned his wounds, which luckily were

just scratches some women had given him. Cosme said, "I love your father, Trini. How could I not love him when I've known him all my life? I love him and he knows it, but sometimes it's hard to follow him. If volunteers don't head for the front, if we don't fight this war with cannons and machine guns, the fascists will win and then we'll really be in for it." "Yes," I said. "It's a little hard to understand how you can win when you're opposed to any form of organized power." As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I wished I hadn't said them. My father looked at me very sadly. Up until then he hadn't said a word. "Everyone's a pacifist in peacetime, Trini. Cosme was one too . . . and listen to him now. It's a question of always being one, in war and in peace. Otherwise, it wouldn't mean anything. It'd be a waste of time saying you're a pacifist."

He stayed at my house for a few hours. It was he who told me what a big shot Llibert had become. "He's got an office like a minister's, with twenty typists and I don't know how many other underlings at his orders. He's got a huge, cream-colored car, enormous, with a uniformed chauffeur who opens the door for him, standing at attention and saluting. The car was requisitioned, of course. It must have belonged to the Marquis of Marianao, and if you ask me, they must have requisitioned the chauffeur along with the car."

"Isn't Llibert ashamed of all that?"

"One day he insisted on giving me a ride home so he could show off, and I was the one who felt ashamed when I saw all those people who know me so well on Hospital Street staring in amazement at that enormous, shiny, silent, creamy car. And when that loathsome cringing slave opened the door and stood at attention, saluting us like a couple of generals . . . I wished the ground beneath my feet would open up and swallow me! If Llibert hasn't headed for the front like your husband," he

added, "don't imagine, Trini, that it's out of loyalty to the pacifist principles I taught you when you were young. That has nothing to do with it! I'll tell you in a minute about his poster campaign. He's not at the front because ~~he says~~ ^{he} considers himself more useful in the rear. According to him, he's absolutely indispensable in Barcelona, irreplaceable, since thanks to him, as he'll be happy to tell you, we're winning the war. We're winning the war, he says, thanks to his propaganda campaign . . .

In fact, they'd made my dear brother something like chief of war propaganda. It turns out that it was he who covered and still covers the city's walls with those deservedly famous posters: "Build tanks, tanks, tanks: the vehicle of victory!" or "Barbers: break your chains!" and so many others, in Catalan and Castilian, half and half, respecting the two languages' co-official status, which would make us die laughing if we were in a better mood.

One of these posters makes me feel like throwing up every time I see it: it depicts a wounded soldier, crawling along the ground, who raises his head and, in a supreme effort, points at us and asks: "And you? What have you done to help?" And this was produced by my brother and his buddies in their cushy desk jobs ^{at} in the propaganda offices! ^q Posters urging others to set out for the front are their speciality. There's also a mysterious school of abstract posters, like one that says, amid a mass of colored blotches and shadows, "Libertorios de prostitución." No one I know has been able to figure it out. Then again, others are easy to grasp: there's one with a hen on a balcony that reads: "The battle of the eggs." The implication is that if every Barcelonan kept a hen on his balcony, no one would go hungry. As if hens didn't need corn to lay eggs! As if they lived on air, ~~the~~ ^{the} poor hens!

All this, then, is Llibert's doing, or at least that's what my father

2X
thinks. And he doesn't just print posters. The areas embraced by his activities are numerous and complex. He's a walking encyclopedia! He's behind various newspapers, some in Catalan and others in Castilian, all encouraging others to go to the front. He ^{broadcasts} ~~holds~~ "chats" ^{over} ~~on~~ the radio, with a thrilling quaver in his voice. He has foreigners on his program, world celebrities whom no one's ever heard of. He's organized "proletarian theater" troupes . . .

This "proletarian theater" business deserves further explanation. According to Llibert, "proletarian theater" requires mass participation. From what they've told me (I've never gone) the masses are on stage, while the theaters are empty. No one goes anymore. In other words, it's the opposite of before, when there were only a few actors on stage but theaters were crammed to the rafters. Apparently that was bourgeois theater.

Llibert's daring and dynamism were undaunted even by the difficulties of staging an opera season: proletarian opera, of course. He took over the Liceu, and now all you can see there is proletarian opera. I don't know where my beloved brother gets his librettos and scores from. I've never set foot in the Liceu, but a girlfriend from my student days, Maria Engràcia Bosch, was curious enough to go. We get together from time to time, and it's through her that I hear about what's going on in Barcelona. Otherwise I might never find out. We met years ago at the university, and even though she's a few years older and was finishing her studies when I was just beginning, we felt close to each other because we're from the same neighborhood. She lives ^{near} ~~at~~ Sant Pau Street.

6X
I ran into her not long ago on the ^{Rambles} ~~Rambles~~, and she invited me to have a cup of tea in a café. "I've got some stories to tell you," Maria Engràcia said. And she told me how, as she passed the Liceu so often

since it's on the corner of Sant Pau Street and a stone's throw from her home, she'd gotten very curious about that proletarian opera they were advertising and one evening she hadn't been able to resist the temptation to go in. I should mention that nowadays, a ticket to the opera is within everyone's reach. So she was one of six people, exactly six, who that evening were the entire audience. It's true that, to make up for it, there were a couple of hundred on stage, "Playing the masses, you know? I don't know where your brother found the score. It was one hell of a drama! It tells the story of a mass movement. The exploited masses go on and off stage, they exit on the right and re-enter from the left, constantly chanting hymns to the future and raising their clenched fists. It's hard to make out what they're saying, but I gathered that one of the exploited workers, the youngest, the tenor, in his efforts to practice free love had gotten the clap. A case of revolutionary gonorrhea! Emerging from the mass chorus, he advances toward the front of the stage. A bass drum suddenly booms out, the masses fall silent at the sight of this tragedy, and the tenor, gesturing menacingly toward the six-person audience, sings the first line of a touching aria: 'Cursed bourgeoisie, you shall pay for your crimes!'"

I couldn't believe it, but Maria Engràcia had seen it with her own eyes and heard it with her own ears.

After this proletarian opera, anything else I told you about my darling brother Llibert would pale by comparison. Those who have been in his office say he embraces all his visitors, calls everyone "comrade," addresses everyone as "tu," and oozes triumph, dynamism, and charisma from every pore. He's organization and efficiency incarnate, the savior of everyone looking for a connecton or a ration book.

It makes me think of one of Uncle Eusebi's phrases, "Because we

revolve around others, we end up thinking those others revolve around us."

Ever since I can remember, my brother's wanted the whole world to revolve around him. When we were kids, four times a day we'd cross the courtyard at Holy Cross Hospital on our way to and from the lay school where our parents taught. He'd stop sometimes outside the "little yard," which was what we called the morgue; it looked out on a narrow lane with only a grill separating it from the passersby. I had to hang onto the bars and stand on tiptoe to see the corpses; there were usually three or four a day, sometimes more. Since they were facing the grill, what I could see best was their bare feet: yellow . . . and dirty. How sad those feet made me feel! "This is what's in store for us," Llibert would always say, "if we don't look sharp." I must have been six or seven; he was eleven or twelve. In my eyes, he was already a "grownup," one of those people who know everything, including the secrets of life and death. I listened to him as to an oracle. So there was a way to avoid ending up like that, a way to avoid showing my dirty feet to those going from Hospital Street to Carme Street. I thought when I was as old as Llibert I'd see it as clearly as he did.

X One morning we found they'd rerouted all ~~the~~ traffic. There was a funeral procession from the Bethlehem Church like none I'd ever seen before: six huge horses, draped with black velvet, drew a kind of fancy coach, black and gold, which held a coffin like a a gold and silver jewel box. Some men on foot, dressed in breeches, with white wigs and black dalmatics, walked on either side of the coach, followed by fifty or sixty priests intoning funeral chants and--after them--a crowd of gentlemen in frock coats and top hats. "This guy knew how to look sharp," Llibert said. "Who," I asked, "the ones with the wigs?" "No; they're nothing but servants."

They haven't given him a fancy burial yet, though that'll come-- doesn't it seem incredible that anyone could envy the dead?--but he's already got a uniformed chauffeur to open the door on his cream-colored car.

Maybe you'll think I'm getting too worked up, considering that it's my own brother I'm talking about. It was one of his snide remarks that really upset me. I'd insinuated what I thought of that creamy car and uniformed chauffeur. He didn't take it lying down. "Yes, of course," he shot back furiously, "you got what you wanted: a rich husband and, to make things better, an orphan to boot. I had to look out for myself, you know. I'm not a dowry-hunter!" My God, it had never occurred to me that anyone could interpret my relationship with Lluís in such a small-minded way!

Thank Heaven I've got a good supply of potatoes in the pantry and don't have to ask him for chits. Because needless to say, sometimes I went to ask him for chits. I'm not going to let Ramonet go without bread or potatoes because I've got it in for Llibert! I could have asked him for another chit, but I'm determined not to ask him for anything that's not absolutely necessary; I mean necessary for the kid. I'll try to look after myself as much as I can. This last time, I heard about a peasant named "Bepo" in Castellví de Rosanes who might be willing to sell me some potatoes. He wasn't very eager. He only wanted money from before the war. Bills from before the war! . . . I can't tell them apart from the others. On the other hand, those who can tell the difference ^{swap} grab them and take them out of circulation. And I hadn't thought of taking silverware and other items of that sort, which was what Bepo wanted if I didn't have pre-war bills. Finally we reached an agreement: almost an entire month of Lluís's pay for a sack!

X But the worst was yet to come: I had to get it home. Bepo wouldn't agree to even take me from his farm to the station. He didn't want to get in trouble, he said, he didn't want to get nabbed as a black marketer now that the laws ~~against them~~ ^{strict} are so Draconian. The maid had stayed home with the kid. Maybe it would have been better to bring them along so she could help with the sack, but then Ramonet would have gotten in the way . . . Finally, for another fistful of bills, Bepo consented to take me on his donkey to a spot near the train station; not all the way, since it's often watched by the police, but pretty close. After that I was on my own.

How heavy it was! I needed four days of bed rest to recover from that sack of potatoes!

X Since the police keep a close watch on the train stations in Barcelona, you have to throw your food out the window before you reach Sants, when the train starts slowing down, and jump out after it. I have to admit that the trains slow down so much ~~to give you a hand~~ that these acrobatics don't have much merit. The reason is that the engineers themselves are wholesale black marketers. The spectacle of all those people jumping out the windows of a moving train would be ~~a pretty sight~~ ^{amusing} if it weren't so pitiful.

X Once I was in Sants, all that remained was the ~~drama's~~ last act: getting the sack to my house. If you're very lucky, you can find a taxi, but it's much more common to have to haul it yourself, sometimes on your back and sometimes dragging it. And there's always the danger that the police will spot you and confiscate it or that those even hungrier than yourself will steal it! And of these, God knows, there are plenty. In vacant lots where garbage piles up now that it's almost never collected, you always see skeletal old men and women rummaging around . . . I arrived home exhausted, and I still have such a backache that the slightest

movement makes me see every star in the sky and a few more. At least these vicissitudes have the virtue of making us see how people lend each other a hand, moved by the blessed sympathy that comes from sharing the same troubles. When I was still half a mile from my house and felt ~~like~~ I could go no further, two soldiers, who told me they were on leave in Barcelona, offered to take the sack the rest of the way. With such generosity, poor guys, that they wouldn't even tell me their names. All I know is that they were from Mollerussa. Would you believe that before these two soldiers' providential appearance, as I tried to walk with that sack on my back, I thought of Jesus lugging His cross down the Via Dolorosa? It's always a comfort to think of someone ~~else~~ ^{else} who had an even lousier time than you; a strange comfort, I admit.

Thank God I'm now home again, with a good stock of potatoes in the larder. Home again, looking out at the lime tree, which humbly does its duty: a duty that must be much more difficult than we think, since we're not trees. How nice it is to have a home, a ~~hole~~ ^{burrow} to curl up in amid this hostile, incomprehensible world that surrounds us. How happy we three could have been--myself, Lluís, and Ramonet--before the war if it weren't for Lluís's bad moods . . . He had no idea of what's so obvious to me: that we were happy, that we could have been happy if he'd wanted. Owning this big house, collecting his dividends from the factory: all that seemed as natural to him as breathing. It never entered his mind that the vast majority of his fellow men possess nothing but the clothes on their backs. Sometimes I think Lluís would love me if he were poor; I mean then he'd realize that he loves me. Because he does love me; the problem is that he doesn't realize it. If he were poor, really poor, he'd discover how good it is to have some little nook ~~in this world~~ ^{in this world} with a table, two beds, and three chairs--and a wife and child. Basically, one needs so little

to be happy: a little love is the secret ingredient. That's all. A little love of what you've got, and it's as though you had everything you could wish for! I'm sure I could be poor ^{but} and happy if Lluís loved me; I'm nothing like my brother Llibert . . . And that's why I get a selfish satisfaction, my only consolation, from how long this war's lasting. It comes from my hope that after all his hardships, Lluís will get more pleasure from his home and ~~his~~ family. Once, on one of our trips, a storm suddenly blew up. There was a woodcutters' hut nearby. We took shelter in it and lit a fire. How happy we felt! Lluís himself said, "It's nice hearing the rain when you're indoors, even if it's only in a hut." We could be so happy, listening to the rain on the humblest of rooftops. But he never was home, except those afternoons when you'd come. You'd have thought the chairs had tacks on them! He was always jumpy, uncomfortable. It's because he asks more from life than poor life can give us. He'll feel like something's missing till he discovers that the best thing in the world is a cup of tea by the hearth in the company of the one you love while outside the autumn wind stirs the fallen leaves. Uncle Eusebi used to say, "Lluís ^{gazes} ~~stares~~ at everything but he sees nothing." And as far as I'm concerned . . . As far as I'm concerned, I don't think he's seen me yet!

June 3

You came so quickly after receiving my letter! If I'd ~~have~~ guessed your reaction, I wouldn't have mentioned that ill-omened sack of potatoes . . .

This is the third time you've showed up unexpectedly with food for the kid. I felt uneasy thinking of the sacrifice these new crates of canned milk and all the other stuff you unloaded from your van must ^{be} ~~imply~~ for you, and at the same time the hours I spent listening to you that ~~evening~~

X and night went by so quickly! If my father knew I'd done it again . . . A
X couple of
X few days after the second time you came, I told him you'd ^{been} ~~spent a few~~
X hours in Barcelona, at my house, "from ten at night till four in the
morning." He shook his head disapprovingly. He told me he was shocked by
that nocturnal chat I'd had all alone with a man who wasn't my
"companion." According to him, free love, precisely because it's free, must
X be wrapped in the ^{pure enough} ~~austerest~~ purity to avoid even the slightest hint of
promiscuity. I burst out laughing: a hint of promiscuity, with you! What an
absurd idea . . . If he knew that this last "nocturnal chat, all alone" lasted
from eight P.M. to six A.M. . . .

X The hours flew by, as though time had ^{stopped} ~~been abolished~~. "Dawn's
breaking down by the harbor. These are the longest days in the year . .
.,," and I couldn't believe the clock, which said four-thirty. You'd just
uttered these words, with the annoying emphasis you add sometimes when
X you're making fun of whomever you're talking ^{to} ~~with~~. With even more
emphasis, you added, "I hate these long days. Give me the winter solstice,
X with its ^{endless} ~~never ending~~ nights! I'd like polar nights even better: that way I
X could sleep for six months straight and dream of endless ^{madness} ~~craziness~~."

I never dream, or almost never, and I don't like craziness, but it's
odd that out of everything you said, these are the only words that stuck
in my memory. We'd spent ten hours chatting; and it reminded me of that
cocaine addict you once introduced to me so many years ago. It was
before I met Lluís, when you and I sold Blast on streetcorners. In reality,
since no one bought it, what we did was stroll around.

It was drizzling that evening, and we'd taken shelter under the
awning outside a big clothing store on the Rambla, not far from Sant Pau
Street. The Rambla looked pretty, glistening in that autumn drizzle, and
what with one thing and another, we'd started talking about drugs and

X 2 drug addicts. It was a completely new subject for me, and I was astonished
to think there could be such people in the world. You said, "Come with
me. I'll introduce you to one," and you took me into a drug store on Sant
Pau Street: a tiny, decrepit drug store that looked more like an herbalist's
X 2 little shop. The only person there was the clerk, who was studying to be a
pharmacist, as you told me when you introduced us. He seemed very old to
X 2 still be a student; he looked over thirty, maybe thirty-five. He had a dull
expression that was painful to behold. You asked him to tell me what his
sensations were when he took cocaine. Out of everything he said, I only
X remember these words, "I take a little of this ~~powder~~ at ten P.M., and the
next thing I know the sun's coming up!" What a strange pleasure,
abolishing time!

X P.S.: My mother just phoned to say my grandmother ~~has~~ died.

June 13

You describe your grandmother on account of mine's death, and your
descriptions make me think of--and don't be offended--the "old lady in the
castle" in an English romance I read when I was twelve behind my
parents' backs. In my house, trashy love stories were forbidden. And
besides, I remember perfectly that you once told me you hadn't known
your parents or grandparents. Why do you get so much pleasure from lying
and fooling people? Either you were lying then or you're lying now. And if
you're lying now, why did you invent this "grandmother who brought to
X mind springtime's first violets, hidden deep within the woods"? If you
X knew how little I like violets. . . . only ^

X Whatever the case may be, I'm grateful for your kind words about my
own grandmother's death. She was nothing like the way you imagine her.
She didn't make me think of hidden violets. The poor woman ~~dirty~~ ^{soiled} her

clothes without knowing what she was doing . . .

They say that before her stroke ^{she'd been} ~~she was~~ very active. They say she loved me a lot (I was three years old when she became paralyzed). She'd been a maid before ^{marrying} ~~she'd married~~ my grandfather, who ^{drove} ~~worked~~ on a streetcar. They had to make a lot of sacrifices so my father could become a schoolteacher. My father would have paid her back with a peaceful old age, but she wouldn't have noticed. She's been unaware of everything for seventeen years. I'd like to think she was a total vegetable, but you could tell from the look in her eyes that her unconsciousness wasn't total. Sometimes, when she'd ^{soiled} ~~dirtyed~~ her clothes, she'd weep.

Her death didn't make me sad; quite the opposite. Why should I lie to you? It moved me; that's all. Now that she's no longer in her corner on the back porch, I feel that the world has changed a little, not much.

Which leaves the true-romance grandmother you felt obliged to dream up for reasons unknown to me. She and all the other "old ladies" whom one encounters in novels for teenage girls perhaps arise from our unconscious wish to find innocence at the end of life, since during it we find so little. As though life were nothing more than a long battle to achieve innocence: to attain it at the end, since we can't find it at the beginning. That's the only interest I can see in such characters. In any case, I beg you to spare me further hoaxes, especially of the edifying sort.

June 14

Your eternal mumbo jumbo, Juli, as though you couldn't live without it. ^{It confuses me} ~~I get lost in it~~; I don't know when you're kidding and when you're serious. Once you'd led me into the cathedral's cloister, as you often did. We both liked strolling around it, lost in our interminable conversations, especially on rainy afternoons.

X
X
X
That day there was no one but us. Outside the sexton's office, there was a table covered with piles of ~~printed sheets~~ ^{pamphlets} beneath a sign that said: Please take. They were, of course, ~~assorted~~ ^I devotional materials of the sort ~~that~~ ^I churches give out for free. You and I both had piles of unsold copies of Blast under our arms. As we strolled around the cloister, every time we passed that table you'd stop and gaze at it in silence. I couldn't imagine what was on your mind.

"We could make your father very happy," you said our fourth time around. "We could make him think that today, precisely when there's a long article by him, we sold every copy. How overjoyed he'd be! Who knows: maybe it would be the happiest day in his life!"

You didn't give me time to reply. You'd already picked up one of those piles of leaflets so you could replace it with all the copies of Blast we had between the two of us.

A few days later, as we were standing on the corner of Bisbe Street, you said, "Why don't we go in and see if they're still there?"

And in fact, they were still there. Among the novenas, the tridiums, and the Messengers of the Sacred Heart; there, beneath the sign saying "Please take." The pile seemed intact. Probably nobody had taken one.

X
"It worked ~~out~~ ^I better than I'd thought," you said. "No one's noticed. Now we can try another idea."

"Another idea? What idea?"

"Another. I've got ideas, you know? Terrific ideas."

X
So saying, you tacked up a leaflet (I later learned it had been printed by a friend of yours) on that bulletin board where they'd post church activities and the times when they said Mass. The cloister was deserted ~~on~~ ^I that day too.

"You see? I've been dying to do this for a while. From time to time,

X I'm overwhelmed by the wish to do something and I have to do it,
however stupid it may be. *I can't help myself*
~~It's stronger than I am.~~

The leaflet said in big black letters: "GREAT PROGRESS IN THE
MANUFACTURE OF HOLY WAFERS." And it continued: "An industrialist in
Chicago has discovered a new technique that permits the manufacture of a
million a second," followed by more nonsense of the sort that I can't
remember anymore. How could I understand what you were doing? When
were you faking: in that cloister or at Santa Maria del Mar? That joke,
more stupid than irreverent, annoyed me as it had annoyed me, that other
day, to see the traces of tears on your face.

X In my family we were atheists; my father had inculcated an absolute
indifference ~~in us~~ toward all religions. Making fun of Catholicism seemed
as senseless ~~to me~~ as making fun of Buddhism or spiritualism, and at that
moment I thought you were a perfect fool. I asked you why you'd printed
them in Castilian. "Because it's funnier that way," you replied.

I hadn't found it funny at all. "It's funnier in Castilian," you insisted,
irritated because I wasn't laughing. "When Saint Philomena appears to my
aunt, she always speaks to her in Castilian. Always in Castilian! She says,
'No temas, yo te salvaré . . .'" You'd already told me that bizarre story
about your aunt's vision. I knew it by heart, but I wasn't in the mood to
laugh. For many weeks, I didn't want to visit that cloister with you. Your
"terrific ideas" seemed so empty to me . . .

Then all hell broke loose at the university. It was December 1930.

#

X Our student group had begun meeting in the ~~cellar~~ *basement* beneath a
delicatessen near the bottom of the Rambla, beyond the Arc del Teatre. I
think it was called La Extremeña. It was a big, dark ~~cellar~~ *basement* with lots of
hams and salamis hanging from the ceiling, ~~and~~ giving it the air of a cave

X with stalactites. The air was impregnated with fumes from the country
hams and kegs of dark beer. The owner of this delicatessen was a survivor
of the First Republic who still had his Phrygian cap and saber from those
days. It was you who'd discovered this octogenarian follower of Castelar,
whom you called "the diplodocus" and who struck all of us as a kind of
prehistoric relic. You had a lot of fun getting him to tell stories about
everything that had been said and done in that "glorious era." Some of the
stories were interesting, but most of them were sad because they seemed
X so old-fashioned.
so worn out. We got in the habit of calling that cellar the "diplodocus's
lair," and we were delighted to have a hideout to conspire in. Once when
twenty-five or thirty of us were there, the man came downstairs holding
his two relics and donned them in front of us. With his Phrygian cap on
his head and his saber girded to his waist, he told us, with tears in his
eyes, "I don't want to die without going out in the street like this again."

We cringed. We wanted to believe with all our hearts that the
republic we dreamed of had nothing to do with what he remembered: the
shabby carnival that had apparently been the first one. But it bothered us,
and I remember one day you told me as we were leaving, "Sometimes I
X have the feeling that eighty years from now we'll be a bunch of old fools
too; yes, like the diplodocus, who can't mention Castelar or Lerroux
X without getting all weepy."

"Do you really think so?" I asked.

"Yes. But if at least," you said, "if at least we could all get to be
the owners of reputable delicatessens . . . at least that would be
something. Maybe we won't even get that far. I suppose Lerroux must have
set him up in business with money from city hall."

Sometimes you'd stay and have lunch there by yourself. You liked
that lair, you said, because it was big and dark. You'd tell your aunt the

X economics professor had invited you to lunch at his house. As he served
X you, the old Estremaduran told interminable stories ^oabout the First Republic
and the Tragic Week in 1909. It seems that at that time he'd already
settled in Barcelona and "it was the last time I went out wearing my cap
and saber." You made him recite whole long passages, which he knew by
X heart, from Lerroux's and Castelar's speeches: passages like "the chariot of
state founders in today's stormy seas" and "let us ^{like}raise the novices' veils,
elevating them to motherhood." You had the time of your life, but I found
X it all so sad, so old-fashioned, so depressing. When the rest of us arrived
at around three in the afternoon, ~~on more than one occasion~~ ^{sometimes} we found you
sitting at a table, having eaten lunch there, chatting away with that poor
X fellow. He'd tell us what you'd had: snails vinaigrette, a couple of slices of
ham, and blue cheese. We'd all have coffee together and ^{launched into}~~embark on~~ endless
ideological arguments as though he weren't present. There were
representatives of the most irreconcilable tendencies: anarchists, centrist
X and leftist republicans, social democrats, separatists, ^{Marxists}communists. We had
X communists of every caliber and variety: Stalinists, Trotskyists, Proletarian
X Catalans, and even some who ^Isaid they condemned the splintering of the
2 X Marxist movement into ^{factions}groups at each other's throats and who had
founded a new group devoted to "dialectical unification." They were always
blathering about Hegel's dialectics; they saw themselves as the synthesis.
Perhaps the most singular of the communist factions that met with us was
the one consisting of that guy who was so thin, tall, and fair and whose
name was Orfila; and his friend, who was so stout, short, and dark and
whose name was Bracons. Orfila and Bracons couldn't see eye to eye with
any of the other groups, not even the one devoted to "dialectical
unification." They proposed a "syncretic fusion" of Marxism and
Freudianism, since according to them Marx's economic materialism could

only be complete in combination with Freud's sexual materialism. One day you told them, "If we add Freud to Marx, we're adding two Jews together, and I can't help worrying that this new path you've found will lead straight to the synagogue. Go ahead if you want; me, I'm not interested. On the other hand, your fusion--as the ancients would have put it, de cibus et veneris--is certainly new and daring." Another issue that gave rise to countless perorations was a certain guerrilla leader who operated in the jungles of Nicaragua or Guatemala, Sandino by name if I remember correctly. At ~~that~~ ^{the} time we all considered Sandino our hero: a hero of the Latin American proletariat's struggle against Yankee imperialism. What ever became of Sandino? It's so long since I've heard his name mentioned. It's odd to think such endless, idiotic arguments could have fascinated us so much. We spent hours in that cellar, sure ~~that~~ ^I we were forging the world's future and that the universe was trembling with expectation. What fools we were. Who knows: maybe the most sensible one, after his fashion, was the Estremaduran, whose mouth hung open in amazement as he listened to all that ~~blather~~ ^{claptrap} he couldn't understand and who finally, shaking his head, would mutter, "You'd all be better off joining the Radical Party."

But that's where I met Lluís, so even if I didn't forge the future of the universe, I forged my own in the diplodocus's lair, La Extremeña's cellar. For better or worse: God only knows.

He was arguing with the other students--I arrived late that day. I felt immediately that ~~that~~ ^{the} fellow I hadn't met was very different from you and the others. At that moment you were talking about pistols, a subject that often came up. Lluís examined a few that one of the conspirators had brought and commented that he didn't think much of them. "A Parabellum's what we need," he said. "A Parabellum!" you exclaimed. "You don't ask for much, do you?"

Rumors of possible military coups swept through the peninsula with increasing frequency, keeping us in a state of constant excitement. One day it wasn't just a rumor but a news item in all the papers: a captain from the foreign legion had rebelled in Jaca.

Two days later, the morning papers were full of news about that captain's summary court-martial and execution, along with another captain who'd supported him. We went into permanent session in the diplodocus's lair. We had to do something spectacular: take over the university, proclaim a republic. There were some heated discussions over which flag to ~~raise~~^{hoist}. Each group wanted its own, and I was amazed to learn that every group had its own flag: black, red, red and black, red and green, and God knows what else! I recall that at one point, you pounded the table and suggested Baluchistan's flag.

"Since no one knows what it looks like," you said, "it won't offend anybody. And besides, seeing what a bunch of non-conformists we are, it's obvious that if we were in Baluchistan we'd hoist the Catalan flag, but since we're in Catalonia, of course that would be frightfully vulgar."

It was finally the federal flag that won by a majority, perhaps because no one there was primarily a federalist. Then another problem arose: what did the federal flag look like? We consulted the diplodocus--I mean the owner of La Extremeña--but he didn't know. He hadn't been a federalist in illo tempore; he'd favored a united Spain, as Castelar and Lerroux had. By the way, at that time very few people knew what the unitary republican flag looked like. The diplodocus himself had only a vague recollection of it and even assured us that he'd seen his idol, Don Alejandro, on more than one occasion with "the monarchist flag stuck in the band on his ~~straw hat~~^{boater}." It was my father who finally saved the day. Making a great effort, he was able to dredge up out ^{or} his memories a

certain flag that my grandfather, who'd been a lifelong federalist, had kept at the bottom of a drawer among other faded souvenirs of his youth.

X You all asked me to sew that federalist flag we were going to hoist above the university. We wanted a really big one: big enough to be seen clearly from the square, and making it was quite a chore. I needed red, yellow, and purple cloth, but in addition, in one corner there had to be a dark blue triangle with a white star for every federated state. More interminable discussions: how many federated states--and therefore how many stars--should there be? My father didn't know. As far as he could remember, his father had never mentioned this aspect of federalism, which the federalists of his generation must have considered secondary. They didn't care who would be federated; the important thing was to federate, and probably they didn't have too clear an idea of what that meant. We asked the diplodocus again. He shrugged his shoulders. It was the first time in his life, he said, that he'd heard of federated states and he barely understood what we were talking about.

How many stars did we need: four, seven, fifteen?

"Better too many than too few," you said. "We'll put a couple of dozen on. That'll be easy enough to do, and then everyone will be happy."

The stars had to be big enough so that passersby could see them from Pelayo Street and the Ronda de Sant Antoni. You and Lluís came over to my house to help me. We cut them out of heavy paper--we needed a whole sheet for each one--and glued them on the triangle. Spread on the floor so the glue could dry, the flag filled the entire dining room and even stuck out into the hall.

X When the great morning arrived, you ^{wrapped} tied the flag around your waist and threw on your overcoat to hide it. Boy, did you look fat! To cover you, we entered the university as a group, clustering around you while

X
2X
X
X
X
everyone kidded us. We found our pals building a barricade with ~~paving~~^{cobblestones} stones from the square. The passersby hardly noticed, since at that time of year it was traditional for ~~the~~^{of} students to build barricades ~~to~~^{and} demand longer Christmas vacations. There were only two or three pairs of policemen--the ones they called Security Police, all elderly and armed with sabers--who confined themselves to watching the students build that ~~paving-stone~~^{cobblestone} barricade. Now, when I remember those old Security Police from the monarchy, with their anachronistic sabers and gray mustaches and--above all--their patriarchal air, as though they all had huge families, when I remember their blue uniforms and their helmets that made them look like firemen, so good-natured, so meek, so henpecked, and when I think of the horrors we've had to endure since . . .

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As we walked among the groups that were building ~~that~~^{the} barricade, those who knew what we were up to applauded ~~us~~^I and shouted, "Long live the republic!" It was then, upon hearing that cry, that a respectable gentleman who happened to be passing by came up to us and asked, "My word: are you kids proclaiming a republic? I thought you were asking for more vacations ~~as you do every year around this time.~~^{again}"

"Yes sir," someone replied, "we're proclaiming a republic, but it'll be a republic based on order."

"I can see," he sarcastically replied, "that between the foreign legion and you students, we'll have one of the most sensible republics in history."

Without wasting any more time, we crossed the vestibule, with its gigantic plaster statues of Ramon Llull and I don't know who else, and went into the law school courtyard, keeping you always in the middle of our group. We climbed the stairs on the other side of the courtyard and entered the library. There we were going to meet up with some others who would be there, pretending to consult the reference books. Meanwhile,

when the librarian wasn't paying attention (which was most of the time), they were supposed to examine the various hidden doors in the library and determine which one led to the winding staircase that in turn led to the part of the roof with the flagpole. None of us had ever gone up on the roof. All we knew or thought we knew was that the door in question was one of those hidden among the bookshelves.

The library . . . how rarely we entered it in those days. When I think of it now, what I remember most clearly is that stuffy smell of dampness, ^{and} moldy, worm-eaten paper. On the rare occasions that we did go, it was only to look up some ^{item} ~~term~~ in the Espasa Encyclopedia, since it was one of the few books we had easy access to. If you ever chanced to want a book that wasn't a volume of the encyclopedia or of Cèsar Cantú's world history, you had to go into the librarian's office, where he received you with a stunned expression on his sour puss. We called him "the old grouch," because that's what he was. He spent his days in that cramped, bare office, which was more like a burrow, reading dirty books from the eighteenth century. He was always annoyed when we interrupted his scholarly research into erotic literature from the siècle des lumières. As he read his way through Mirabeau, the Marquis de Sade, Diderot, Choderlos de Laclos and other fathers of the French Revolution, he filled file card after file card, which he stored in cardboard shoeboxes. With the patience of a Benedictine, he prepared God knows what monumental tome about that subject, at once so racy and so quaint. Outside his specialty, he had no interests. It was mostly a waste of time asking him for books, since he never could have found them. Only a tiny fraction of the library had been catalogued.

I gathered that it mostly consisted of volumes from the monasteries and convents shut down in 1835, books certain worthy citizens had rescued

from the flames or picked up from the street and brought to the university. That's why so many are theological tracts or biographies of saints, a mountain of books written by friars in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and of no interest to anyone. Tens of thousands of dead, mummified books filling ~~bookshelves~~ and more ~~bookshelves~~, gently turning to dust amid the sounds of gnawing termites and the indifference of that sex-maniac librarian.

There are so many of those books by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century monks and nuns--so many were gathered when Mendíbal closed the monasteries and convents--that they ~~can't~~ ^{couldn't} possibly fit in the university and overflowed into my high school. There they occupy a big airshaft covered by a skylight, a well three stories deep, its walls entirely lined by books bound in parchment and exhaling a powerful aroma of woods after a rain, of wild mushrooms, of mildew. I almost never dream, but on one of the rare occasions--years ago--I dreamt I was falling endlessly down that "book-well" . . . You and Lluís, since you went to ~~the~~ ^a Jesuit high school, never saw it. I should tell you that at the very bottom, on the ground floor where the dust and stagnant air were densest, we had our gym classes. There we did breathing exercises. And to make it all even more lugubrious, on the left there was a genuine skeleton, held together with wires so it would stand upright, since in that class we ~~studied~~ ^{studied} not only ~~gymnastics and breathing exercises~~ ^{calisthenics} but the rudiments of anatomy.

But what's all this I'm telling you? Why have I wandered into these memories of the university library and the gym class ~~in~~ ^{at} my high school? Every day I spend more time remembering things from back then as my thoughts drift from one recollection to another. I sit as though paralyzed in my armchair, staring into space, unable to concentrate on anything, and it's like a saraband of memories dancing before my eyes--trivial memories

X without interest or consistency, of things dead and gone that could make sense to me alone, and then only just. ^{barely}

X I was writing about the day we hoisted that flag, and I'd reached the point ^{when} ~~where~~ we were in the library searching for that hidden door that led to the roof. Those pals of ours who'd set out to identify it had made a mistake. The one they pointed out was the wrong one. When we realized what had happened, it was too late to turn back; we were already on the roof. That door had indeed led to an endless winding staircase, but not the one leading to the flagpole. Emerging on the other side of that immense roof, we saw the flagpole in the distance across ^a ~~that~~ vast stretch of tiles, like a mountain peak we had to scale on all fours.

X Lluís led the way, followed by me and then you. We crawled forward single file, while the tiles rattled beneath our hands and knees. I'd insisted on coming with you. That adventure struck me as too glorious and exciting to miss. You didn't want me to come. In the library, Lluís had thrown a fit--in whispers of course. But I'd stubbornly followed, indifferent to your opinions, and now that all three of us were on the roof there was no time to argue. Lluís told me to hold onto his foot, you grabbed mine with your free hand, and we crept forward.

"From a plane," you said, "they'd think we were three cats."

It seemed we'd never get to the other side of that roof, and meanwhile we heard shots in the square. Later we learned it was our friends firing those two pistols, the only ones they had--the ones Lluís had examined in the lair and pronounced not very good. The Security Police didn't return their fire, since they were armed only with sabers, but we learned later that since the students kept firing, they were replaced by civil guards. All this occurred as we crept over those rattling tiles, unaware of what was going on below. Those pistol shots surprised us. They

X hadn't been part of our plan. When Lluís heard the shots, he turned to me and again told me to go home, that ~~there was nothing for me to do there~~ ^{I wasn't needed}. He was furious, but I refused to turn back. I wanted to follow you and do what you were doing! I was swept away; it all seemed wonderful to me. Those shots below made it even more exciting. Lluís was getting more and more exasperated. In that awkward position, on all fours and stretching out one of his legs so I could cling to it, he called me a snot-nosed kid and a pain in the neck and other, more vulgar insults too. While we were arguing, you'd crawled past us, ~~untied~~ ^{taken} the flag ~~from~~ ^I around your waist, climbed onto that little metal platform around the tall flagpole, and were struggling with the rope. You couldn't get it free. You've never been very handy, poor Juli. You kept getting tangled up in that double rope. Finally Lluís went over and, seeing the rope caught near the pulley, stood on the railing around the platform, hanging onto the pole, to untangle it. You climbed up too to help him. You'd left the flag on the roof tiles and I sat down on it to make sure a gust of wind ~~didn't~~ ^{wouldn't} blow it away.

X Sitting on the tiles, I stuck my head out over the stone eaves. You two were so busy trying to figure out how the pulley and rope worked that you didn't notice me. I stuck my head out, and how odd the square looked from so high above! The center was deserted, without automobiles or streetcars. On the near side was the ~~paving-stone~~ ^{cobblestone} barricade our friends had erected, and ~~on~~ ^{at} the far side was the civil guard on the Ronda de Sant Antoni.

There was no doubt that they were civil guards. I could clearly make out their three-cornered, patent-leather hats. "Beat it!" Lluís shouted. "Give us that flag and get the hell out of here!" But I was fascinated by that group of civil guards. Our pals, behind the barricade, kept firing those two pistols from time to time. The civil guards were standing in

formation on the curb, immobile, not returning their fire. One of the officers had noticed us. He was looking at you through his binoculars and motioning to another officer as though imitating what you were doing. You'd finally managed to get the flag tied to the rope and were hoisting it. The wind unfurled it like a sail, and it fluttered gracefully with all its paper stars. You two were still standing on the railing around the platform, hanging onto each side of the pole. It would have been child's play for them to pick you off with their shotguns, but they remained in strict formation, with their hands on the muzzles and the butts on the ground, while that officer gazed at you through his binoculars and kept motioning to the other one.

We retraced our steps, crawling back across those tiles that seemed to rattle even more on the return trip. As we walked through the library--the invisible librarian must have been in his burrow, reading de Sade--we met some of our friends, who'd been impatiently waiting.

"Did everything go all right?"

"The flag is up," you said, "and what a sight it is! Everyone will think it's from the United States!"

"We have a big can of gasoline," they said, "but we don't know what to do with it. We ought to set something on fire."

"Since we're in the library," you replied, "why don't we burn it? What better spot? It'll burn like dry straw."

You were carrying that can toward the shelves with the Espasa Encyclopedia when Lluís, beside himself, started insulting you, calling you a swine, irresponsible, and other, less printable things. He grabbed the can out of your hands and gave you a shove. You just shrugged your shoulders.

"If all this went up in flames," you said, pointing to the encyclopedia and Cèsar Cantú's history, "do you really think it'd be a big loss?"

"Let's head for the chancellor's office," one of the students said.

"How about the auditorium," said another, "where there's that oil painting of the king in his Order of Calatrava robe?"

"We could build a bonfire in the square, right under those civil guards' noses," Lluís said. "and throw in that painting and all the other stuff we find in the auditorium and the chancellor's office."

X The outdoor stairs ^{leading} ~~that lead~~ up to the auditorium were jammed with students. Somehow they'd gotten their hands on an enormous beam they were using as a battering ram to break down the doors. Ten or twelve of them were holding it, encouraging each other by chanting, "One, two, three!"

X The heavy, double doors creaked and trembled as the latch and hinges yielded a little more with each blow. Then one of the doors unexpectedly gave way, and those holding the beam tumbled to the floor with their momentum. The auditorium was ours! On the far side, above the podium, Alfonso XIII smiled at us with a mischievous gleam in his eye, impeccably attired in ^a ~~that~~ dazzling white robe.

"Let's try him!" someone yelled.

The auditorium had filled in a moment with a flood of people. We improvised a courtroom, including judges and lawyers dressed in caps and gowns someone had found in one of the offices.

"Let Soleràs read the accusation!" a voice shouted.

And you stationed yourself on the right, beneath that grotesque judge's bench, pulling a black gown that was too short for you over your head while the others yelled, "Silence! Soleràs is going to accuse the king!"

"Comrades, let's hear what the district attorney has to say!"

Strangely enough, that gown too small for you made you look taller

and skinnier, even more like a greyhound than usual. It was a waste of time calling for silence. You went ahead and read the accusation, your voice lost amid the uproar. Only those of us who were near you could hear what you were saying.

"We accuse you of being king, of being named Bourbon, of having an unlucky number," you recited monotonously, as in a litany, wagging your finger toward that oil painting. "Just as others are called Jaume Puig or Anton Rafeques, you call yourself Alfonso XIII, much to your subjects' amusement. Some people call you Mr. Thirteen, and they think they're so ~~witty~~ ^{funny} that they laugh till drool trickles down their chins. We accuse you, Mr. Thirteen . . ."

Those of us who could hear what you were saying stared at each other in amazement. What were you leading up to? Unperturbed, you continued, still wagging an accusing finger at that painting, "We accuse you of having long legs and a short torso, which have led the populace to dub you 'Daddy-Longlegs' or 'Stilts.' We accuse you, Alfonso-Longlegs, of not letting those good-hearted lads in the foreign legion cheerfully rebel whenever they feel like it and have a little fun staging a coup d'état . . ."

Now the few of us who could hear you looked at each other, not in surprise but in horror, but you went on talking without noticing us, "We accuse you of having your portrait painted with this robe that looks like a sheet. We accuse you because that ~~holy~~ ^{saintly} Austrian archduchess who was your mother never caused a single scandal, and virtuous queens are so boring. ~~Our~~ ^{The} honorable and hard-working public's legitimate hopes of some juicy gossip were dashed . . . but above all, Mr. Alfonso Thirteen, we accuse you of the most unforgiveable crime, a crime the university will never pardon in the era that is now beginning: of being neither a Hegelian nor a Nietzschean, neither a proletarian nor a superman! Intolerable! You've

never gone beyond being a follower of Krause, and who knows: maybe you never even got that far! Therefore, your portrait deserves to be burned at the stake!"

The crowd, which heard the confused murmur of your words but couldn't make out their meaning, constantly interrupted you with ovations, and as they echoed through the auditorium, you stood there in silence, modestly looking down as all great orators do. The only ones not applauding were the few of us who heard what you were saying.

X When ~~you~~^{you'd} finished your speech, the walls shook with thunderous applause. Some students were standing on a ladder, taking down that portrait, which was much bigger than it had looked when it was hanging up. A bunch of us dragged it into the chancellor's office. Since the windows there are so big and look out on the square, we thought we'd douse it with gasoline, set it on fire, and fling it out the window. It fell onto the barricade, and the force of the blow knocked the frame apart and scattered the flames. We poured more gasoline out the window, while other students defenestrated other portraits of dead chancellors and God knows what other pedants wearing gowns covered with medals, along with administrative files we dragged out of cabinets and anything else we could find that would make a nice bonfire.

The windows were wide open, and after defenestrating everything we deemed easily defenestable and inflammable, we piled up tables and chairs to make a barricade outside them. Looking out, we saw the civil guards, still in formation on the sidewalk along the Ronda de Sant Antoni, on the other side of the square. They were standing there, stiff and immobile, their hands on the muzzles of their shotguns. Only the two officers moved. They calmly paced to and fro, walking past that line of guards as still as statues.

X "What a shame my pistol's jammed," said one of those who'd been firing from the ^{eston}barricade.

"I'm out of ammunition," said the other.

"We'd have a perfect view from here . . ."

While those two frustrated sharpshooters gloomily discussed the divine pleasures they were missing, a guy came up to us, very excited. He'd just come in from the street.

"I've got a Parabellum!"

At the sound of that word, "Parabellum," a religious silence fell. Everyone stepped aside to let him pass. "He's got a Parabellum," we told each other, looking at the newcomer in admiration; "a Parabellum," "a Parabellum" . . . The word swept through the crowd. Everyone craned forward, trying to see that prodigious student who'd arrived with a Parabellum in his hand.

Then you did one of those strange things you do, one of those strange things that disconcert everyone and that one doesn't manage to understand, and then imperfectly, until long after you've done it. It's only today that I understood what you'd done that day.

You put your arm around that guy with the Parabellum and took it from him.

"A Parabellum! Let me have it. I'm a first-class sharpshooter!"

A first-class sharpshooter? That's the first I'd heard of it! But you'd grabbed it. Holding it in your hands, you knelt behind the barricade outside the window and started firing at the civil guards. I can still see that pistol now. It was shiny and dark, with a long barrel, very big and polished. You fired shot after shot. As soon as you'd emptied it, that guy who'd brought it and was kneeling beside you would pass you more ammunition. All around you, the brass cases piled up. The rest of us gazed

at you, holding our breaths, full of admiration and in some cases envy.

Meanwhile, at an order from that officer with the binoculars, one of the civil guards had shouldered his shotgun. The others stayed where they were, their hands still on the muzzles. I saw it all perfectly as I peeked out over the barricade. It was a single civil guard who fired back at your Parabellum, while that officer stood beside him, as though directing and controlling him. He returned your fire very calmly, and his bullets all lodged in the ceiling: not toward the back of the room, as would have been the case if he'd been aiming at us, but ^{above} ~~near~~ us, as though he'd aimed at the top of the window. The bullets made a soft thudding sound as they sank into the stucco. And you fired and fired.

Suddenly I thought, "Juli can't even make out the civil guards at this distance. He's too nearsighted."

During our strolls through the narrow streets in the old part of town, I'd had plenty of chance to notice your myopia. I knew that at thirty paces you couldn't tell the difference between a man and a tree, and at forty or fifty you could barely see anything. I was quite aware of this, despite your efforts to make us think you had normal vision. Any allusion to your myopia, any suggestion, however tactful, that you ought to see an eye doctor and get some decent glasses, would put you in a rage. Once when Lluís insisted, you told him where to get off, "Go to hell! I can see better than you!" I suddenly thought that from that window, the buildings on the Ronda de Sant Antoni would look like a vague blur to you. Why, then, had you grabbed that pistol? How could you fire at the civil guards if you couldn't even see them at that distance?

Some days later, we had a meeting on Hospital Street. You were the man of the hour, the student who'd kept firing that Parabellum as long as there were bullets. Even battle-hardened old anarchists, veterans of battles

with the company unions, stared at you respectfully.

Everyone was looking forward to seeing you, to hearing what you had to say. The crowd filled the dining room, the hallway, the foyer, the bedrooms, the living room, and the kitchen.

X When you began to speak, ⁹once of the most compact silences I'd ever heard fell: a truly audible silence. You began in a modest tone that increased everyone's good will, "Everything we do, everything we can do, poor Kierkegaardians that we are without even realizing it . . ." I don't think anyone present had ever heard of Kierkegaard, but it didn't matter. They listened to you open-mouthed. You went on, "Everything we can do is nothing compared to what the Hegelians are doing and even more what the Nietzscheans will soon achieve." No one understood what the devil you were talking about, and they began to look at each other in perplexity, as their silence turned to surprise.

"To sum up, brothers or comrades or whatever the hell you like to be called, everything we've done, this heroic hubbub, this glorious pandemonium, this historic hullabaloo, is what we should have been doing in 1923. I could justify my not taking action at that time, seven years ago, using the excuse that I was only eleven years old. But that's of no importance; it was then that we should have acted. To do ^{so} ~~it~~ now, however bitter a pill it may be to swallow, however wounded we may feel in our self-respect, is a bit . . . chicken-hearted. No, brothers or comrades: I don't mind defining myself as a humble chicken in Kierkegaard's barnyard. If anyone present considers himself a Hegelian or Nietzschean eagle, let him cast the first egg. Even if our flight had been less aviculturally modest, we should still support the king in his efforts to restore civilian ^{rule} ~~government~~ rather than throwing our weight behind a captain in the foreign legion who thinks he has the right to proclaim a republic whenever

he feels like it. Remember, brothers and comrades: bayonets are fickle. If today we let them proclaim one thing, let's not complain if tomorrow they proclaim another."

They finally got the message. They understood that you were condemning the military uprising in Jaca, and indignation suddenly replaced perplexity. All hell broke loose. You waved your arms and yelled like someone drowning in a storm. "I've been to Russia and Germany! I know what it's all about! I know what kind of nasty tricks those Hegelians and Nietzscheans are up to!" Your voice was lost amid the cries of outrage. They were yelling in the dining room, the hallway, the kitchen, the bedrooms. It seemed like the apartment was going to collapse amid those shouts, stamping feet, whistles, and insults. If I heard you, if I managed to understand what you were saying, it was only because I was standing between you and my father.

X
X
And the biggest surprise of all came from my father. Undaunted, he rose to his feet. I should say that he has years of experience addressing hostile, screaming crowds. He's so often told angry multitudes the opposite of what they wanted to hear! With a sweeping gesture, he ~~ordered~~ ^{stilled} the tempest ~~to grow still, and the tempest obeyed him.~~ "Old Milmany's going to speak," everyone said, and the word was passed from the dining room to the hall and from the kitchen to the bedrooms. Once silence had been restored, my father began in a calm and deliberate tone, as though ~~he~~ ^{he} ~~were~~ ²⁴ weighing each word before letting it fall ~~in~~ ^{into} that sea so ready to turn stormy again.

X
"It would ill behoove us, brothers (and by the way, I urge brother Soleràs ^{to} ~~to~~ never call us 'comrades,' which is a military term and consequently repugnant), it would ill behoove those of us who call ourselves libertarians to interrupt someone expounding his ideas. All ideas,

of whatever sort, have the right to be freely expounded. If we don't respect others' freedom, in the name of what shall we demand that they respect ours? I agree with you, brothers, as you well know. I agree with you that some of the thoughts brother Soleràs has just expressed are a little . . . surprising. Especially expressed here in the offices of Blast, a bastion of cooperative anarcho-syndicalism. I know brother Soleràs, and I know how much he enjoys confounding others with paradoxes and conundrums. But having recognized this, and with all possible reservations in regard to whatever may seem excessive and shocking in his words, I will frankly admit--and among friends frankness is a sign of trust--that in some respects I would perhaps agree with him more than you might think. I do not now believe nor have I ever believed in the use of force, in the rule of pistols and even less bayonets. In this respect, I agree with brother Soleràs. Between a civilian monarchy and a military republic . . ."

"What? You've turned into a monarchist? That's the last straw!" his great lifelong friend Cosme exclaimed. He was sitting with us, chairing the meeting. It was like a signal for all hell to break loose again.

"I'm neither a monarchist nor a republican; I'm an anarchist," yelled my father, but no one could hear him. Everyone gesticulated and vociferated. The most vulgar curses and crassest insults flew back and forth. There was one short guy who, so they could see and hear him, had climbed onto the sideboard and bellowed over and over again as though he were about to have an apoplectic fit, "Fuck the king!"

When everyone was going down those endless stairs, still arguing passionately and insulting each other, Lluís took my arm and held me back on the fifth-floor landing. You'll remember that on each landing in our building, as in most buildings of its type from the last century, there's one of those wooden benches where you can sit down on your way up to

catch your breath and rest. The ones in our building are wide enough for two people to fit in them. Lluís pulled me down beside him. Those going downstairs swept by us with a dull roar like a mountain torrent. Only an occasionally word or sentence stuck out. "I'd rather see the Moors come back than have that king around," Cosme said. The stream plunged down, and for a moment we heard your voice carried upward through the stairwell, "A republic brought in by a military coup! We'll see in a few years how much you like that . . ." And again Cosme's voice, "Student radicals! A bunch of rich kids!"

X But I'd stopped hearing or listening. I was alone with Lluís on that bench, and he ~~hugged me to him~~ ^{clasped me} with all the strength in his arms. You all plunged down the stairs like a mountain torrent, still arguing and exchanging insults. For me you no longer existed; nothing on earth existed except Lluís. Years have gone by (it'll be seven this December); God knows a lot of dreams have been shattered, one after the other, but the memory of that day when he kissed me for the first time still stirs me as much as it did then. What wouldn't I forgive in exchange for that moment, the most glorious in my life?

Sometimes I think that if that old Jesuit in the attic on Arc del Teatre Street had baptized me, maybe I would have been as deeply stirred as I was that day with Lluís. I've never, never felt an emotion that strong--and I know I never will.

#

A few weeks later, the police arrested Lluís and some others from our meetings in La Extremeña's cellar, including Orfila and Bracons. Since they couldn't prove anything, they only held them for a few days. They told us that during their interrogation, they'd been astonished to find out that the police knew all kinds of details about our discussions in the

cellar, details they could only have learned from someone who'd been there. For example, they knew exactly who'd said what in our discussion about the federalist flag. They even knew that someone had uttered a certain incomprehensible phrase, de cibus et veneris, to which they attributed great importance because they thought it was some kind of mysterious and dreadful revolutionary code word. We were dumbfounded. Could there be a traitor, an informer in our midst? But who? Now, so many years later, I guess I can tell you that Bracons and Orfila suspected you. Lluís and I stuck up for you, of course. They insisted that you were odd, peculiar, that your reactions were unpredictable and your ideas incoherent, and anyhow your behavior was disconcerting. "It had to be someone," they said, "and he's the type."

It took us a while to find out the truth, and we finally found out by some accident I can't remember any more. The informer was the old Estremaduran, the diplodocus, the follower of Lerroux. It seems that he'd made a deal with the cops. He lent out his cellar for all kinds of secret meetings. The police never broke them up--that would have cut off their flow of information--but he had to tell them everything he heard. Between his cold cuts and what the cops paid him, he could make a good living. It wasn't that he was a phony republican, a fake--as we naively thought when we found out he'd informed on us. Apparently for him, the two things were compatible: he was sincere when his eyes filled with tears as he showed us the saber and Phrygian cap he'd worn during the Tragic Week; sincere when, with trembling voice, he recited whole passages from speeches by Lerroux and Castelar; sincere when he told the cops everything we said; he was always sincere. At the time we didn't understand. It's not that we understand now either, since some things are incomprehensible by their very nature, but we've seen so many bizarre

phenomena since then! Some of them really make my head spin. Do you know: some days I suspect that my darling brother Llibert is basically a sort of diplodocus . . . We young people appreciate sincerity above all else, but we don't realize that a certain type of person is sincere in whatever he does. Duplicity, in such people, isn't a lack of sincerity but double sincerity. They're sincere twice! And Llibert is distressing. He's distressingly spontaneous and sincere, with that thrilling tremolo in his voice . . . It's nothing more than a hunch, a vague and perhaps mistaken suspicion. In any case, he'd be a far more refined, subtle, and complex diplodocus than the one at La Extremaña.

X But there's another mystery: how come the police didn't arrest you and the others--me, for example? Why did the owner of La Extremaña give them some names and not others. There's only one possible explanation: he let himself be guided by his likes and dislikes. It's obvious that you were especially in his good graces and he wanted to protect you: ~~mysteries~~ ^{enigmas} of diplodocian psychology that we never could ~~clarify~~ ^{unravel}. On the other hand, he must have despised Lluís and even more that inseparable pair devoted to a syncretic fusion of Marxism and Freudianism: Orfila and Bracons.

Later, you published that long article in Mirador: "Youth in Rebellion," which we all read and argued about so passionately. At the time, we thought the whole universe revolved around us.

They paid you five duros. You proudly told us about it, saying "They're the first I've ever earned." A few days later you added, "Not only were those five duros the first I ever earned, but I suspect they'll be the last. The editors at Mirador turned down the second article in the series. They said one's enough on this subject."

X X You didn't seem upset; on the contrary, you were ~~elated~~ ^{elated}. You told us, "The ~~editor~~ ^{editor-in-chief} at Mirador is the one you'd least expect. You enter

the office, and it's full of gentlemen who radiate importance--celebrities, big-shot writers and politicians--any one of whom looks like he could be the editor-in-chief. Exceptional intelligences, dressed by the finest tailors in Barcelona, formidable talents. All ironical, all sceptical, all with Italian silk ties that cost a fortune, all ~~with~~ ^{and} smoking fat cigars. Glories of Catalan letters! In a corner, unnoticed, you see a short, thin man who looks like he's wearing a shipwrecked-sailor costume. Decency restrains me from describing his tie. Well, that shipwrecked sailor is the boss. Your first impulse is to drop a couple of coins in his hat, but he's in charge. And this guy's really intelligent! He's miles ahead of us! A sort of shabbier version of Tallyrand. With his worn-out shoes ^{wildered} ~~covered with mildew~~, sprouting mushrooms when it rains, he's the boss at Mirador; with his threadbare shirt, with his face that looks like it's been years since he ate a hot meal, with his disgraceful pockets--always stuffed with books! He sits in his corner and listens to the others. He rarely says a word.

24X However briefly you ^{speech to} ~~talk with~~ him, you ~~have~~ ^I to realize he's got one of the clearest minds in Catalonia. He's read everything, he knows everything, he's aware of everything. It was he who told me, 'Young man, we only publish one article about youth in rebellion a year, so don't get your hopes up. Our readers couldn't stand more than one article on this subject.

X It's an article like--how shall I put it--like that other one, [↓] The First

X Chestnut-Sellers Are Out. [↓] I could tell you to come back next year, when there's some new ruckus at the university and students are in the news

2X again, but every year we need a new writer for [↓] Youth in Rebellion. [↓] It's not like the one about the chestnut-sellers, which can have the same author every year. When it comes to youth in rebellion, in the course of a year the author's stopped being young and not even his own mother remembers what he wrote.' He told me that right to my face, in these

very words, 'not even his own mother' . . . Like I said, an exceptionally intelligent man!"

Why do these silly memories come back to me now? Things you did and said in those days, which seem so long ago . . . How faded these memories seem after everything that's happened and is still happening! After everything we've had to see and suffer through, those days, which ~~then~~ ^I seemed so turbulent, now seem ~~like~~ ^I a lost oasis of peace . . . You'd taken that Parabellum from that guy for the same reason that the civil guards ~~--who are such~~ ^{I and they've} superb marksmen--shot at the ceiling. Will we ever see days like those again?

June 15

Those days will never return, Juli. Something's happened to this country that's poisoned it forever . . . If you knew; your encouraging letter, so full of hope, arrived when I'd just heard about Cosme's murder. Soon it'll be a year since this monotonous butchery began. How could we have guessed that Cain's seed had been blown so far and wide in this world, ready to germinate in a propitious moment? How often, during these eleven months, we've believed the government would put a stop to it, that it already had, that it would bring those arsonists and murderers under control; that if the war had to continue, which was sad enough in itself, that at least it would be a clean war! Or has there never been a clean war? Has the sacrifice of soldiers at the front--on both sides of the front--always been sullied by the crimes in the two rears? Do we not only have to kill Jesus but also crucify him between two thieves? If you only knew. You speak of happy times, perhaps just around the corner, of a "peace more beautiful" than any the world's seen before. You write that your heart tells you you'll soon "touch Heaven," take a major step in your

life, achieve what you most desire, most dream of, most want "with all my senses and soul." If you knew; I don't really understand what you mean, what you're referring to, but if you're referring a time of peace or at least a clean war--and who knows, maybe a clean war in its sadness would be even more beautiful than a joyous peace--if this is what your heart tells you, Juli, I think you're mistaken. Cains range as freely as ever through the world. Everything that happened last month, which had filled us with hope, was for nothing.

In spite of everything, the murders continue. Sometimes I'd like to ignore them, try to lead my own life secretly, on the sidelines of it all, far from this cruel and incoherent world that surrounds us. But wouldn't that be monstrously selfish? And even if I decided to shut myself up in my own selfishness and indifference, how could I block out the news, so full of the world's stench? It would seep through all the cracks, following me into my own bed when I wanted to bury myself beneath the covers: to sleep and sleep like a hibernating animal! ~~and no one to wake me up!~~

X I couple of weeks ago I was walking down Pelayo Street. If you could see the windows on those stores, once so bright and full of things, now so empty and sad! And the same crowds, as big as ever, but so sad and weary, dragging their feet . . . And I dragged my own, holding Ramonet's hand. He was crying because I wanted to buy him some new shoes, which he badly needed, and he didn't want new shoes; he wanted an accordion. I could have said I'd buy him both things, an accordion and shoes, and put an end to his tantrum, but that day I'd decided not to give in any more to his whims, because if I always give in he'll end up being a spoiled brat and it'll be my fault. Speaking of shoes, if you knew how hard it is to find a decent pair. The ones on sale now are made of a kind of cardboard that doesn't last and if you want real leather they cost a fortune, and

X
Ramonet wears out a pair of shoes so fast . . . So I was walking down Pelayo Street, dragging Ramonet behind me as he cried and whined, and I felt so sad and defeated among that sad and defeated multitude, when all of a sudden a man I didn't know stopped me. He was an old man, short and thin, very badly dressed, whom you'd have taken for an unemployed construction worker who hadn't had a meal in days, but what eyes, like those of a helpless, resigned, good-hearted child--what eyes, my God, of a tormented old man who only keeps going because his hopes are fixed on something not ⁱⁿ of this world.

"Aren't you Trini Milmany?"

"Yes," I replied without knowing who he was.

"Don't you remember me? I'm your godfather . . ."

X
I couldn't resist kissing him on both cheeks. My godfather, the marquis, whom I'd completely forgotten! He lifted up the kid to give him a kiss, and the kid immediately stopped whining, so intrigued was he by this unknown old man--he also didn't remember him--who treated him so affectionately in the middle of Pelayo Street. He looked so moved, poor marquis. There were tears in his eyes. The crowd, which flowed by without stopping, elbowed us as we spoke, and it was like being in the middle of a swollen stream, battered by pebbles the ~~raging~~ ^{torrent's} torn from the banks.

"Someday the waters will again grow calm," he said, and his eyes seemed to stare off into the distance as blind people's do. "Then you'll have to visit me often and bring Ramonet, who's my godchild too. If I don't invite you now, it's because in the current situation, it would be dangerous for you to frequent a house like mine. Someday the victors, whoever they may be, will realize ~~that~~ ^{wretches} we're nothing but harmless unfortunates and let us die out slowly ~~through natural causes~~ ^{or through attention} . . ."

X
2X

X Then he disappeared into the crowd again, a poor anonymous little old man amid that gray, weary, starved multitude that flowed ceaselessly down Pelayo Street as down the bed of a stream. Not longer after that encounter, the anarchist's widow, the one who lives on Arc del Teatre Street, came to see me in Pedralbes. The marquis had disappeared from his house without a trace, his daughter-in-law didn't know who to ask for help in finding him, and she'd thought of me, the only "Red" she knew. She'd thought I could help her out, poor little me! The only thing I could say was that I'd seen him a short while ^{before} ~~ago~~ on Pelayo Street.

That I could help! And meanwhile, they'd murdered Cosme.

X I don't know if I told you that on account of what happened last May, he'd broken violently with his friends at Solidaridad Obrera. To rise up against the autonomous government in the current situation, Cosme said, was to play into the fascists' hands--something that, moreover, is perfectly obvious.

X What happened was that a judge, encouraged by the anarchists' apparent defeat, decided to investigate a certain spot in the woods beneath Tibidabo, near the Rabassada highway. Cosme, as far as I could make out, was unaware of the murders his comrades had been committing scot-free for months. Strange as it may seem, there are many like him, many who still don't know a thing about it or who blindly believe that this sinister chaos we've been living through is a glorious revolution without the slightest ~~speck to dim its dazzling light~~ ^{blemish.} A glorious popular revolution . . . Juli, if this were true, if it were a people's revolution, it'd be enough to make you hate the people with all your heart! So much innocent blood, my God!

By chance, Cosme ran across that worthy judge, and what happened was that they'd hardly started digging in that spot when they discovered a

hidden cemetery: two hundred and thirty-six corpses. The coroner determined, as they were dug up one by one, that all showed clear signs of having died violent deaths, generally caused by a bullet in the back of the neck. Everyone in Barcelona knew that during months and months, the anarchists had taken thousands of people "for a ride" to those woods; they'd force them into cars and, once they'd reached that spot, they'd shoot them in the back of their necks as they got out. Everyone in Barcelona knew, except for Cosme and thousands of other true believers like him. The novelty wasn't in this but in the fact that a judge had finally appeared ready to open an investigation and that there was a newspaper willing to keep the public informed. Most of the corpses were from the early days. It was impossible to identify them unless they happened to have some form of identification in the pockets of their half-rotten clothes, but a few were more recent. Among these was my poor marquis.

Cosme published articles about it in Blast, and for the first time since that ill-fated weekly had been founded, it sold out. Cosme's articles didn't use a lot of fancy adjectives like my father's. Instead he relied on bare, hairraising facts, with names and details, precise dates and places. All Barcelona hung on his series. If there'd been elections at that moment, the judge, the coroner, Cosme, and my father would have won by a landslide.

So a few days ago, Cosme's corpse also appeared, right near the Rabassada, also with a bullet hole through his head. The judge and coroner escaped to France, but my father refused to follow them. "I'd rather die in Catalonia than live abroad," and no one can budge him. It's exactly what the old marquis said, except he said it less rhetorically, in such a simple way, "At my age, one prefers dying at home to living among strangers." I

X was lucky to be able to persuade ^{my father} ~~him~~ to hide in our house. It was hard to make him understand that he should drop out of sight for a while and suspend publication of Blast for at least a few weeks. It was so hard to make him lie low for a while at my house, where his enemies won't come looking for him because they don't know where it is.

#

So what do you think of that? My father's staying at my house again, though not for long because he can't wait to get back to Hospital Street and start publishing his weekly again. Hiding out and suspending publication strike him as unforgiveable acts of cowardice.

My poor father's not much over sixty, yet he looks as old as the marquis. I'm not at all surprised that everyone calls him "old Milmany." His mustache droops weakly, like the flag of a defeated army, while his gaze expresses disillusionment and exhaustion. He confides in me, telling me long stories, sad despite his sarcasm, about his latest unpleasant experiences with his family.

X "I told your brother never to set foot in my house again. I'd rather not see him. Let him lead his life and I'll lead mine. He's my son and I'm his father, but it's better for us not to know anything about each other. I don't know if you've heard that he's moved into that ^{first} ~~ground~~-floor apartment on the Passeig de Gràcia, where he'd installed his mistress a while ago. I don't know if you've heard of her. Her name is Llopis, a celebrity on the Paral.lel. Llibert says she's an artist, a great actress, the star of Catalan theater. Poor Catalan theater . . ."

"What about proletarian theater? Has he given that up?"

"Not at all. Have you forgotten what he's like? Since the government pays for it, we have more proletarian theater than ever: proletarian play after proletarian play, without audiences of course. Llopis, on the other

hand, fills the Espanyol to the rafters. That's where the masses go!
There's a line outside the box office that ~~goes~~ ^{stretches} all the way around the block. The proletariat . . . If I told you, Trini, that I've entirely lost faith in it! If I told you everything, poor Trini . . . To maintain appearances, lest anyone accuse Llopis of being less proletarian than the rest, Llibert digs up revolutionary ditties she can intersperse with her usual numbers. She sings about the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, those wicked fascists and the libertarian dawn. They get everything in! All mixed together with striptease and old-fashioned vaudeville. And the Espanyol is packed; like sardines in a can. Their ovations bring the roof down! The proletariat, Trini . . . hmm . . . At least--let's be fair--those performances at the Espanyol don't cost the taxpayers anything. They're great business! The ministry of culture doesn't have to bankroll them like they do with proletarian opera and mass theater. On the contrary, they pay a lot of taxes. In this respect, they certainly can't be criticized. People are lined up three hours before show time, and Llibert says that on Saturday nights, the lines stretch all the way to the beginning of Sant Pau Street. Among the ditties my darling son's come up with for Llopis to sing, none's as idiotic as this one:

Gee whiz, my o my,
gee whiz, my o my,
how brave, how brave,
what brave guys are in the FAI.

"Llopis sings that?"

"Yes, kicking up her leg so it's a joy to behold! And winking at the audience! She's a real hot tamale, sharp as they come! And I don't mean that only in a bad sense, Trini. This girl is genuinely sharp. She coined one of the most celebrated and truest sayings in the history of this

revolution. One day last August, when she showed up at the theater, she found that a committee of stage hands and ushers, supported by the cleaning women and the ones who work the refreshment stand, had decided to collectivize it. They told Llopis that in the future they'd follow the principles of libertarian communism, so that from the diva down to the humblest usher, everyone would be paid the same. 'Oh yeah?' she said. 'Then let the ushers show their asses!'"

My poor father didn't laugh as he told me all this; on the contrary, he looked as sad as could be. You can tell a mile away that he considers this "liason" between Llibert and Llopis a "mésalliance" that shames the family.

"I know that not long ago he and Llopis went through the motions of a 'civil wedding.' What's the big difference between a civil wedding and a religious one? They didn't invite me. In any case, I wouldn't have been caught dead there. It's not these civil or religious costume balls that honor the union between a man and a woman but the worthiness of the companion one chooses. Maybe your mother and I have spent our lives quarreling, but she's an honorable woman. Now, of course, we quarrel more than ever . . . She went to Llibert's city-hall wedding!"

My poor father: the first day I showed him around the house--he'd never seen it all before--he stopped and shook his head at the crucifix in our bedroom.

"At least it's good to see you've got it out in the open, not like those cowards who hide it."

He gazed at it for a moment in silence, as though he were thinking something. Finally he said softly, as though talking to himself, "This Jesus of Nazareth . . . has always troubled me . . . Some people say he was a kind of anarchist, and I used to think so myself; but no. It's not that

simple. Jesus of Nazareth . . . the Great Loser . . . the man who took upon himself the cross of our iniquities and miseries, who accepted all our failures . . . He wasn't just an anarchist. He was something else that escapes me, that I can't understand."

He even had warm feelings toward Lluís's great-grandfather.

"What a pair of sideburns! Those damned Carlists overdid it!"

He sat down in my armchair, beside the window that looks out on the garden. "It's nice being in your house. I feel so good here! If you knew how lonely I've felt lately in our apartment on Hospital Street . . . It crushed me to see you turn into a reactionary, when you were the only one in the family I got along with. As for your mother . . . if you knew . . . I've felt so disillusioned, Trini . . . And I'm not just talking about your mother and brother, no. I'm talking about everything, about this sinister revolutionary circus we've been living through for a year. What a sinister circus! I never would have imagined! I've ended up thinking that any idea, however good, becomes bad once it's ~~popularized~~ ^{triumphed}."

Another day he said, "Sometimes I feel so tired, Trini, so worn out. A great longing comes over to me to leave this world, where apparently you can't fight against one injustice without committing a bigger one. I feel such a longing to say goodbye to everyone, to say 'I'm leaving. If the rest of you want to stay . . . do as you like . . .' Other times what I feel is an overwhelming nostalgia, not because I'd like to be young again, because I wish I were thirty or forty. No; I don't give a damn about being young again! That's water under the bridge! I wouldn't go back for anything on earth! No, it's not a wish to be thirty or forty that makes me nostalgic. It's so you and Llibert could be young again and our ideals could be as innocent as before. Our ideals were so beautiful then, so beautiful when no one had tried to put them into practice! It's so

beautiful to believe in something, to believe in it with all your heart, to believe in it so fervently that your greatest happiness would be to sacrifice your life for your faith! And you, when you were young; even Llibert, when he was three . . . to believe in an ideal, to believe in one's children . . . Llibert was so cute when he was three; he was so clever.

X The things he said! When you were young I'd take you to Les Planes every Sunday. That was my Mass, you see, my way of celebrating Sunday: to take you out in the country, to the woods around Les Planes. We had so much fun, the three of us, while your mother stayed home on Hospital Street, cooking a delicious paella! What happy days we spent in Les Planes, surrounded by nature! You always asked me to tell you stories, fairy tales, and I always tried to choose stories that were instructive, with something about geography or natural history. How intently you two would listen! A father's like a god in his children's eyes. Now . . . now Llibert . . . Now, after everything we've seen this past year, how can I go on believing in anarchism?"

"Why don't you believe in Jesus, father? He's never let anyone down who believed in Him with all his heart."

"I'm too old. Snakes shed their skins, not men. Once we've reached a certain age, our skins are too thick . . ."

#

He's told me a lot of things these past few days, including some odd things I hadn't known before. He loves this house of ours, unlike my mother, who thinks it must be "very depressing" living in Pedralbes, "so far from the center of town," "in a house all by itself, with no neighbors around." It turns out that all his life, my father had preached that every working-class family ought to have its own house and garden. In an effort to achieve it, he'd always proposed building cooperatives and credit unions,

X and once, many years ago, he^{he} even tried to organize a cooperative that
X unfortunately ~~failed and had to declare bankrupt~~^{want}. I didn't know a thing
about all that. And now I'm discovering, to my amazement, that I hardly
knew anything about my father's ideas and that--even more amazing--many
of them aren't so cranky.

X "This house of yours, of course, is very bourgeois. It's a rich man's
X house. Most people could never afford houses like this, though that would
be ideal, that in times to come everyone who wanted a house like this
could have one. Who knows? If we progressed in that direction instead of
building more and more lethal weapons . . . if the money the world spent
on arms and debauchery (including the wretched debauches of the poor), if
all the effort that now goes into ~~pathetic things like those~~^{depressing} went into
X ~~building~~^I decent, comfortable housing . . . You see, on this issue, like so
many others, your mother and I have never agreed. We started arguing
about it years ago. You were too young to remember. One year, at
Christmas time, I won the lottery. It wasn't a big prize; I'd only bet a
pesseta, but it was enough to buy a little house in Sant Andreu or Poble
Nou with a yard big enough to plant a couple of pines. Lots of workers
had houses by that time. It's not at all incompatible with anarchist ideas,
if you understand them correctly. Quite the opposite."

"The idea of yours I've never understood," I said, "is your pacifism.
If we have to be pacifists under all circumstances; if we can never defend
ourselves, no matter what happens . . ."

"If we can't always be pacifists, it's better never to be pacifists and
to prepare for war in peacetime, because you should either fight a war
right or not fight it at all. What was the use of all those years of pacifist
and anti-militarist propaganda if when push comes to shove we let them
drag us into a war? The only use was to make our poor soldiers worse

than the others. They've had to improvise everything, right down to the very idea of an army, which all those years of propaganda had erased from Catalans' awareness. If we weren't planning to be pacifists to the bitter end, it was criminal to be pacifists. The only thing we did was prepare for the bloodbath our poor soldiers (don't kid yourself) are ^{living through} ~~seeing~~ today. No one had prepared them for war; for years we'd been telling them there should be no more wars . . ."

"So if I understand you, you would have preferred no resistance . . ."

"Yes, however strange it might seem: that's what I would have preferred. To let the generals and ~~phalangists~~ ^F win right at the start? Yes, it would have been better not to resist. They're going to win anyway (there's no point in deluding ourselves), and we'd have spared ourselves all the blood, all the murders, the arson and theft that have shamed us. Then they would have had full responsibility. Not to go to war, after preparing the workers for so many years to refuse to fight! Some people, realizing how inconsistent they've been, talk about 'a war to end all wars,' 'defending pacifism with guns,' . . . pathetic sophisms that don't make up for anything. To fight 'a war to end all wars' or 'defend pacifism with guns,' we should have started preparing for war a long time ago. Since we were unprepared, the best thing was not to fight at all . . . But let's forget about that; it's too complicated. Let's go back to what I was saying. It turned out that those proletarian houses with a couple of pines in the front yard have always disgusted your mother. She wanted to spend all the prize money on a trip, which she claimed would be both fun and educational.

"'Travel is educational,' she insisted. I--how should I put it--don't understand what the hell you can see in Paris or Rome or Marseille that isn't practically the same in Barcelona. People are the same the world

over. She went on and on about how educational, how culturally uplifting travel is, and as you know, if someone invokes education and culture, I throw up my arms in surrender, and not just because I'm a schoolteacher. So we went to Paris and Rome. You and Llibert were still very young (you must have been about one-and-a-half or two), so we left you with your grandmother, may she rest in peace, poor dear. She still hadn't had that stroke that confined her to her wheelchair. We went to Rome and Paris: the first and last time I left Barcelona. Our money melted away because your mother wanted to stay in the very best hotels. 'I want to see how the ruling class lives,' she said. 'This'll be our only chance.' That's what our educational trip came down to: expensive hotels every night till I was sick of it. My God, how it all got on my nerves! And when our money ran out . . . back to Hospital Street! Your mother's like Llibert. They hate the bourgeoisie because they want what ^{it's} ~~they've~~ got! But don't misunderstand me: they want to be spend money like the bourgeoisie, not to worry about making factories and businesses work. They refuse to see this other aspect of ^{the} ~~our~~ Catalan bourgeoisie; they've never wanted to see it. When you come right down to it, your mother and I have never seen eye to eye even though we both claim to be anarchists. I don't know if I've ever seen eye to eye with anyone except poor Cosme, may he rest in peace, ^{even} ~~and~~ then not on all subjects. If anything I'd written and preached for more than forty years had been understood, had sunk in a little or had some effect, we wouldn't have seen these suicidal collectivizations. Yes, suicidal, the way they were done. They're killing the hen that laid the golden eggs! They think capitalism is magic, that all they have to do is take over to make everything run smoothly! They haven't the slightest idea ^{of} ~~of anything!~~ They're killing Catalan industry, the result of a hundred years of good sense, hard work, and thrift; Catalan industry, which kept us all alive . . .

X You can't change social systems from one day to the next. First the working class had to reach an appropriate educational level and organize itself, and both things take a long time. People had to organize first in consumer cooperatives, learn how to ~~govern~~^{run} and administer them. Only after years of practice in running their own consumer cooperatives and a few mixed ones, like that building cooperative I was telling you about, only then could we start thinking about production cooperatives, which up till now--we must remember--have always failed. When production cooperatives, instead of failing, began to prosper, then we could think about converting all industry, or at least the biggest companies, into workers' cooperatives. Anarchism's not something you create in a day or a year! Precisely because it's the most grandiose undertaking in the history of the world, it requires many years, maybe even centuries. We have to take it slowly, step by step, if we don't want to go wrong . . . A project of this kind can't be based on hatred; it has to come from love. And love rejects no one; love asks for all the help, wherever it may come from, that could make this world more beautiful, just, and comfortable. Do you know what the committee running a workers' production cooperative would do if it understood its responsibilities and sincerely wanted to see its members--that is, the workers--prosper? Well, in most cases, it would appoint as manager the one who's been managing for years and who usually is the owner. Because with very few exceptions, who's better qualified to run an industry than the one who's been running it all these years so efficiently? So what do those cretins do: they decide to kill them all . . ."

X Then I told him about Uncle Eusebi, who a few months ago slept in the same upstairs bedroom he's now in. I hadn't told him before, but his last words made think of it. He listened to me very attentively and shook

his head.

"Yes, just as you say, he sounds like a lovely person. You can be sure that since they ~~made him flee~~ ^{forced} the noodles in that factory haven't come out right--if they come out at all. Right now, that good bourgeois must be as appalled by his side's barbarism as I am by ours."

"His side? You're mistaken, father. He's not on the other side at all. In his last letter, he told me he'd decided to sail from Genoa to Santiago de Chile, that he's in no mood to be on the other side, 'which doesn't attract me any more than yours. Basically, they're all the same!' And he adds, 'Whoever wins, I've lost.' I've heard so many people say that: the poor marquis, for example. Lluís's uncle and the marquis--I know because they told me themselves--on July 19th were with the autonomous government ^{and against} ~~not~~ the generals, ^{just} like everyone ^{else} in Barcelona. But the next day, when the anarchist patrols started running around burning and killing, how could they feel enthusiastic? Lluís's uncle had always voted for Catalan Action and subscribed to La Publicitat, while the marquis voted for the Regionalist League and read La Veu de Catalunya. Between the rebels on the one hand and those anarchists running wild on the other, what should they have done? How should they have reacted? 'Neither,' said Uncle Eusebi; 'Neither the red nor the black,' said the marquis. 'Whoever wins, I've lost,' they both added. There's been a horrible misunderstanding in our country. Everything we've seen since July 19, 1936, father, is like a nightmare. No one knows where we're headed or why. My God, how could anyone take Uncle Eusebi or the marquis for fascists? But Lluís's uncle, the boss of Son of Rusalleda: how could he stay in Barcelona if they were ^{out to kill him} ~~hunting him down~~? He would have ended up like the marquis. From Italy he'll sail to America, he writes, but with a great weight on his heart. For him, life outside Catalonia has no meaning, it's absurd, he'll

feel like a failure, but what else can he do? In Santiago de Chile, he'll start over again, from scratch . . ."

My father hung on every word I said, shaking his head. "We have to unite not around ideas but around feelings. When I think that in order to abolish the death penalty, they're murdering half of Catalonia . . . When I think that only now, when I'm over sixty, I finally understand that ideas aren't worth a damn!"

June 29

Dear Juli,

// The day before yesterday, I got a letter from Lluís after weeks without hearing from him. I was so happy to find out you're both in the same brigade. It was so long since he'd written. The only thing I'd get from him was the monthly money order he always sends.

I've been very depressed. That's why I didn't write to you for such a long time, after those endless letters I was sending. I wasn't in the mood to write; and besides, I couldn't bear the thought of bothering you with my eternal household worries.

His letter's very affectionate, which I attribute to your influence. You have a lot of influence on him.

In a month, it'll be a year since he left. A whole year without seeing him . . .

My father went home to Hospital Street. They say the danger has passed, that the government's reined in those death squads, but isn't that what they said back in May? In any case, the irreparable damage has already been done. It's too late to fix it now. It's a good thing you soldiers at the front don't know how hellish Barcelona's been for months and months.

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It's hard for me to believe the murderers have really been brought under control. I keep worrying about my father. He's started publishing Blast again, attacking those "cannibals from the FAI" more violently than ever (and he calls things by ~~their~~ ^{gives} names), with even more hyenas and panthers than before and long articles framed in black in memory of "our true ~~anarchist~~ ^{libertarian} martyrs like Cosme Puigbò, savagely shot by thugs disguised as anarchists." In his last editorial, he went so far as to say he's beginning to suspect that what moves his sect, more than any proletarian or libertarian ideal, is "a murderous wish to destroy the earth that so generously welcomed them and has never distinguished between its natural and adopted children." Those were his very words. I have the last issue of Blast sitting here on the table. Poor Blast, and poor father . . . He may see more clearly than many, but what good does that do if no one pays ~~any~~ attention to him?

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This war is lasting forever, and I'm not very brave, Juli. Yesterday the evening papers came out with big headlines: BIG BATTLE ON THE PARRAL RIVER! I couldn't tell you how anxious I felt. Why did there have to be a big battle just when Lluís had arrived? I imagined the worst. I imagined him wounded, perhaps abandoned ^{and} lying in no man's land . . . All my joy at thinking he was in the same brigade with you turned to despair! Why hadn't he stayed ^{in Madrid} ~~where he was~~? Now, after all those battles, it's turned into a quiet front.

Today the morning papers carried a rectification. The battle wasn't on the Parral but rather on the Parval, which is another river a long way away. I'm ashamed to feel so happy! As though dead and wounded didn't bother me as long as they weren't Lluís. Or you, of course.

As far as my beloved brother Llibert Milmany is concerned, would you believe that despite the anarchists' loss of influence, he's managed to

X land on his feet.[?] He's more of a big shot than ever! If I make some crack about the good life he's leading, he replies, "You see, while we're waiting for complete equality, I have to look after my family." His family, for the moment, consists only of Llopis. And then he winks at ~~you~~^{me} to make sure ~~you~~^{id} understand he knows how to ~~feed~~^{take care} for himself.

August 25

Dear Juli,

X I got another letter from Lluís. It was so telegraphic and made me feel so abandoned. Thank God I can tell you my troubles; otherwise I'd be ~~so~~^{all} alone. I have the kid, of course, but how can you open your heart to a kid? He's spent the last few days in bed: it's nothing, just an upset stomach. Any little thing will make children run a fever. Now that they've removed his tonsils, he'll never have tonsillitis, and that's a comfort. And I can feed him: another comfort. Can you imagine: I actually felt proud when the doctor told me he had indigestion! We still haven't finished the first crate of condensed milk, and four more are waiting. How lovely they look, stacked in the pantry! I think of you every time I see them.

Lluís, on the other hand . . . Would you believe that all he talks about is a guy who used to work in the science department and who's in your brigade? Doesn't he have anything more interesting to say?

It's funny that you never mentioned this ex-doorman. In fact, I think I remember him: a doorman named Picó. He was very handy, and the physics and chemistry professors would always call on him when some electrical gadget broke in the middle of an experiment or water wouldn't come out of the faucets. This Picó could fix everything. He even knew how to stuff the rare specimens that the biology professor would sometimes buy from hunters.

What a coincidence that this same man is an artillery captain in your brigade! But Lluís could write about other subjects too . . .

You insist that I tell you more about my life right now, as though I hadn't told you everything in these interminable letters I write! I'm worried about my parents, who refuse to leave Hospital Street. My father would "rather die" than go live with Llibert, and my mother will "be hanged" before she'll come stay with me. They ought to split up: father with me and mother with Llibert, but who could separate them? They need each other, if only to have someone to quarrel with. And besides, they're so at home in that apartment, so used to everything in it, they'd feel so lost without their picture of Pi i Maragall in his Phrygian cap, without that lamp in the dining room, without their rows of chairs. They'd pine away in another house, but in that one someday a bomb will blow them sky-high along with all their neighbors. Apparently the fascist pilots can't aim very precisely and when they bomb the harbor and the railroad lines they scatter bombs throughout the old part of town. Every time there's a raid, I feel more anxious about them. They, on the other hand, are so used to it that when I bring up the subject they stare at me in amazement as though they couldn't understand what all the fuss was about.

"You've always had a bee in your bonnet," my mother said one day, "as if you were ashamed of being born on Hospital Street. You always thought our apartment was slummy. What do you expect? We're workers and proud of it."

As though that were the point! The first bombing raid made a big impression on them, the second one less, the third left them indifferent, and now they listen to the bombs as they'd listen to the rain falling. They never go to the shelters.

Maria Engràcia Bosch, who used to study science with me and whom

I've mentioned before, is from a family as working-class as ours or more so. She and her mother, who's a widow, live on one of those lanes that go between Sant Pau and Barbarà Streets. In comparison, Hospital Street is positively high-class. Well, a few weeks ago, sick of bombs and sirens, they decided to pick up and move to a little peasant village. I just got a letter from her in which she describes the last raid in her neighborhood, and I can't resist quoting it since you're so curious about life in Barcelona. "The sirens woke me up," Maria Engràcia writes, "and when my mother heard me moving around, she opened the door between her bedroom and mine.

"'They're bombing us,' I said.

"'Yes, here we go again,' she replied. 'What a nuisance.'

"The electricity had gone off. From the noise they made, we gathered that our neighbors were going downstairs to the shelter. I opened the shutters so we could see. The moonlight lit up the whole room. We could hear firing in the distance, as though it were coming from the sea, and that made me think it was the fleet and not the planes. The boy was fast asleep."

She's referring to her little brother, who's six years old.

"'Why don't you take him down to the shelter, mom?' I asked.

"'Are you kidding?'

"We hadn't gone in a while: laziness, indifference, fatalism, call it what you will. My mother lay down again on her bed. We heard those guns in the distance, and compared with the racket the bombs usually make, it seemed like a peaceful, soothing patter. So we both went back to bed. I heard her mutter, 'There's nothing to worry about. It sounds like it's over now.'

"It was then, when I'd gone back to bed and was fast asleep again,

that all of a sudden without knowing how I found myself in the next-door apartment. My mother and the neighbors told me a bomb had fallen. They'd heard it; I hadn't. If it weren't for them, I'd think I'd flown through the air like a witch, going right through the wall and landing on the floor next door. Thank Heaven no one was hurt.

"We thought it was the end of the world,' they said. Looking out the windows, we saw a cloud of smoke rising from the rooftops all the way down to the harbor. It was whitish, but it gradually turned blacker and meanwhile we heard the bells on the ambulances and the firetrucks' sirens.

"It was almost time for the sun to come up, and I wanted to go out and see what had happened. I'd gotten dressed and was putting on my makeup in the bathroom when my mother said, 'We'll have to get someone to fix this wall.'

X "Till then I hadn't noticed the gap. I was still putting on my makeup when we heard the rat-a-tat-tat of the anti-aircraft guns on Montjuïc. The puffs of smoke from the explosions were almost right over our heads in that sky that was just beginning to get lighter. It was as if, suddenly, ten or twelve little clouds had flowered among the few stars that still twinkled, and all together, it reminded me of that blue flag with the fleur-de-lis that Joan of Arc held in the French chapel I used to go to as a girl. Those puffs of smoke bursting in silence--the noise took a little while to reach us--made me feel secure, protected, almost happy. They were our anti-aircraft guns, watching over us! It didn't occur to me that if they were firing, there must be more enemy planes overhead.

X "The second time I did hear it. A tremendous, violent explosion shook the whole building. I could feel the floor swaying beneath my feet, as though I were in a boat. It made me feel like the ground was going to split open and swallow us up. In front of me, strangely enough, was the

bathroom mirror in which I saw my own face, stupidly calm. A violent gust of air suddenly filled our apartment with clouds of dust, making us cough. The dust was so thick in the street that we couldn't see a thing from the balcony. On my bed, I saw a big brass coffeepot that I recognized at once: it was from a bar called The Date Palm, across the street from where we live. The smoke and dust didn't dissipate. We couldn't see a thing, but we heard ~~screams and shouts.~~ ^{shouts and}

"Then we heard bells and sirens again, this time in our own street. I found myself in the street, surrounded by a crowd gawking at it all. Amid the ruins of the two houses that had caved in I saw a man--or maybe a woman--rise, all white, as though they'd covered his clothes, his face, and his hands with lime or chalk. Gradually others rose from the wreckage, while others tried to get up but couldn't and still others lay still, and they were all as strangely white as that man had been. Their blood, against that white, was so shocking that I thought, 'I'd never imagined it was so scarlet.'

"An army ambulance had arrived, big as a truck, and ~~the~~ soldiers from the medical corps started collecting the wounded. One was a kid about four or five years old who kept yelling 'My mommy's in there!' and pointing to that mountain of rubble. The firemen were hard at work too. It was easy to see it'd take hours to pull out all the people. There was an old man with half his body trapped under a huge beam that they had to lift off him. Four big, strong firemen could barely budge it. They sent for the neighborhood carpenter so he could saw it in half. 'Keep it up!' shouted the old man, encouraging him in his sawing. Finally they pulled him out. He'd lost a leg. Meanwhile, other firemen hosed down the fires that were burning. We could see bodies among the flames; some of them were still moving. It was impossible to get through to them till the flames

were under control. As they advanced, they pulled bodies from the coals. Some were dressed and others were completely naked, some all white and others all charred and black. Sometimes when two soldiers would try to lift one of them, the body would break in two in their hands. Meanwhile a man, stark naked except for his hat, shouted from a sixth-floor balcony on a building of which nothing but the facade remained. He'd been flung all the way up there from the bar at The Date Palm, where he'd been having a cup of barley tea for breakfast, by the shock wave from a bomb that in passing had stripped off all his clothes except his hat. The soldiers yelled back that he should be patient, that the firemen were busy right at that moment.

"After all this," Maria Engràcia concludes, "you'll understand how we suddenly had the bright idea of coming to this farmhouse, which belongs to one of my mother's cousins. May God repay him for his hospitality."

What could I possibly add to this letter? That I feel guilty about living in a peaceful neighborhood like Pedralbes, where all we hear are distant explosions--except for certain rare occasions when a bomb falls a little closer.

It's strange to think so many people keep on living in those neighborhoods down by the harbor as though nothing out of the ordinary were occurring. One day, after visiting my parents, I took a stroll through those streets so cruelly battered by the bombings. The same shopkeepers as always were there. I spoke with some of them. They couldn't understand why I was surprised to see them. Why should they leave their neighborhood? Where would they go?

"What about the soldiers?" one asked me.

X Another explained that he ate ^{at} in a soup kitchen. There are lots of them now, and this one's on the Passeig del Colom, all the way down by

the harbor. The meal consists of a single dish. "If I'm lucky and there's a raid at supper time, some of them make a dash for the shelter and I can have seconds."

X Going back to that doorman in the science department who's now a captain in your brigade, I recall that once Maria Engràcia Bosch--she was further along than I was and was working on her doctoral thesis--gave one of our physics classes when the professor was at a convention in Königsberg. This doorman would ~~sit in on~~ ^{attend} our classes whenever he could. He'd stand by the door, hat in hand, listening to the discussions and watching the experiments with great curiosity.

X That day, Maria Engàcia was talking about freezing points and specific heats when all of a sudden the doorman respectfully interrupted her. "With your permission," he said, "I'd like to ask a question. You say that distilled water at normal pressure freezes at zero ~~degrees~~, and if I understand you correctly, you define zero ~~degrees~~ as the temperature at which distilled water freezes at normal pressure. I certainly hope you won't attribute what I'm about to say to any lack of respect for science and learning, but that sounds like a ^{tautology} ~~vicious circle~~."

X Everyone roared with laughter, and I was by no means among those laughing least. Maria Engàcia laughed from her podium and the doorman laughed at the door, happy to have caused such merriment. And yet, what were we all laughing at? We were laughing because a doorman had uttered those words. We laughed like the fools we were. When years later, I found almost the exact same words in one of Einstein's early essays, instead of making me laugh they left me profoundly perplexed.

August 30

You write to me about childhood memories and ask if my

grandmother's death didn't bring back any. Yes, but they're not related to her (I can't remember ever seeing her out of her wheelchair) and they're not rose-colored ones either. I doubt there was ever a rose-colored childhood; old ages maybe. Perhaps I already wrote this to you, but I think innocence is something very hard to achieve and that we can only manage it after a lifetime of struggle. We have to win our innocence! Maybe that's our souls' highest aspiration . . .

But an innocent childhood? My mother made me wear skirts much shorter than other girls'. That was ^{one} ~~part~~ of her "advanced ideas," stronger and more stubborn after she'd "been to Paris and Rome." The bad thing was, that the other girls made fun of me and that depressed me a lot. One day a new girl came to school: she was wearing a skirt even shorter than mine! A circle immediately formed around her. Everyone tried to find the most insulting word, the cruelest; and the most hurtful of all . . . was the one I came up with! I was so happy not to be a victim any more, to have graduated to being a bully!

X What other childhood memories can I share with you, since that's what you want to hear? Ah, those Sundays my father took us to the woods around ~~le~~ Planes. We'd sit under a pine tree and eat almonds and peanuts. Under every pine tree there was a proletarian or lower middle-class papa surrounded by children eating almonds and peanuts like us. Our father told us stories that I'd listen to, open-mouthed. They were more educational than fun even though, as a good schoolteacher, he tried to join the two elements. There was a lot of geography, along with the rudiments of physics, botany, household medicine, ethics, and the emancipation of the working class: these were my fairy tales, spiritual nourishment for my early childhood. And how I enjoyed them, since they were the only ones I knew! The less educational they were, of course, the

better I liked them, the more my father forgot about his mission and let himself be carried away by his fantasies. We need fantasy so badly when we're young! We need so badly to transfigure this world, into which we've come without knowing how or why, with touches of fantasy and mystery! But it's more than that: it's more than this thirst for fantasy and mystery, I mean for poetry, that children feel so strongly. They're afraid. All children are afraid: afraid of the dark, afraid of those they don't know-- people and animals--afraid of losing their way, afraid of God knows what. My parents, like all unbelievers, denied that this fear was innate. They attributed it to the bad habit--as they put it--of telling children about scary things like death, the devil, ghosts, wolves, and witches. But they'd never told me about anything like that and I can remember how scared I was like it was yesterday, how scared I was at night when I'd suddenly wake up, those formless, limitless fears that floated in the darkness in my room. One day, when I was older, I met a girl in my school who told me that when she was afraid at night she'd call on her guardian angel. She'd say,

ital { Sweet guardian angel,
~~to thee I pray,~~
~~come what may,~~
Never forsake me
by night or by day.

I learned this little poem by heart without telling my parents, and from then on when I woke up I'd recite it aloud. Once my mother heard me and gave me a good scolding. My father, on the other hand, just shrugged his shoulders and stared at me with a kind of tender curiosity.

I believe with all my heart that if we need poetry and faith in order not to feel much more unlucky than if we'd never existed, it's because poetry and faith are our very life, because without them this whole world

would crumble into nothingness like a vain incoherent phantasmagoria. If you could see how big Ramonet's eyes get when he's listening to stories; that is, of course you know since you've told him so many. And how he likes to hear that his guardian angel, the Christ child, and the Virgin Mary are watching over him, how it comforts him to know that! We'd feel so abandoned in this world without another world to sustain us! What difference does it make if the images we have of this other world are so childish? Can we be, can we ever get to be something more than poor abandoned children? Is there really much difference between our understanding at the age of three and our understanding when we're over twenty? How could we ever imagine Divinity except in a childish way?

X One Sunday when we were in Les Planes, it started raining cats and dogs. Our father covered Llibert and me with his raincoat, a very roomy raincoat--I can see it now--also very worn and shabby: a true schoolteacher's raincoat! And I'm still touched and moved when I remember what a feeling of protection, of security suddenly came over me when I ducked under that raincoat like a chick burying its head beneath its mother's wing. It's one of my earliest memories; I was about three years old. Another very early memory, perhaps from the same period, is of one X Sunday morning when instead of going to Les Planes we went to the harbor. From time to time we'd take a trip on one of the excursion boats, which we adored. But what stuck most in my memory wasn't the boat but the legs on the people walking along the Rambla. We'd always walk from our house to the water and that stretch of the Rambla, ~~between Hospital~~ X ~~Street and Porta de la Pau~~ ^{the port} X, was always jammed with people on Sunday mornings. Since I was very little at the time, all I saw was legs and more legs: a forest of moving legs. How sad they made me feel, all those men's and women's legs! But why am I telling you this? Because you asked for

childhood memories, so here you have them . . . That's enough for one day; it's a depressing subject. That gloomy forest of legs was only broken at the ^I street crossings. At that time, at each street crossing there was a porter with a red cap, waiting for customers, and a woman selling colored balloons. Those porters' crimson caps and the brilliant colors on the balloons made me feel so happy, but what a short time it lasted! As soon as we'd crossed, I'd find myself immersed again in that ocean of legs . . .

When we were kids, we used to call those colored balloons "bombs," and now . . . how those waxy faces come back to me as I write all this childish nonsense that ^w ~~A~~ouldn't interest anyone. Sometimes when I wake up in the middle of the night, I see their open, sightless eyes in the dark.

Will God ever forgive us? My darling brother has turned them into big posters, and as you walk around Barcelona you run across them at every ~~step~~ ² ~~up~~, plastered ² on walls, incomprehensible faces--faces of children for whom bombs are anything but colored balloons. How much propaganda our brilliant Llibert's been able to squeeze out of them. It makes me feel like vomiting! Because I know what our side's hiding; I heard it from a middle-aged man who was on a business trip to Melilla when the colonial troops rebelled. His wife and children were in Barcelona, and because of that he was determined, however difficult it might be, to get out of Spanish Morocco. He managed to slip across the border, reached Casablanca, and from there he took a ship to Marseille. I met him in our neighborhood shelter, where I always take Ramonet and the maid when there's a bombing raid. He only shows up if it's worse than usual. So it's thanks to this gentleman, whom I hardly know, that I found out our side began it. He says that a week after the foreign legion and the Moorish troops rebelled, the battleship Jaume I bombarded Melilla. It was three o'clock on a Sunday afternoon, when the Europeans have their siestas. And since

because of the heat they get undressed, he says men, women, and children ran out in the streets half naked, fleeing their bombarded houses. The shells from the Jaume I fell all over the city, but especially in the European quarter. When one hit an apartment house, the upper floors flew through the air "as though they were made of paper," this man who was there at the time says. The buildings disappeared amid clouds of smoke, and when they reappeared all that remained were piles of rubble with bodies buried under them. That was July 26, 1936, only a week after the war began. And unlike the Moors, almost all the Europeans were republicans! So if I hadn't chanced to meet this businessman from Melilla, who must be over forty years old, I'd never have known. All the Lliberts in this world carefully concealed it so we'd think only fascists bomb cities. The details he gives are so similar to the ones in Maria Engràcia's letter that I quoted the other day. It's sad to have to admit it, but they're all equally inhuman. And don't think we usually discuss these kinds of subjects in the shelter. It's such a varied crowd, and you'd be amazed at how frivolous and insubstantial the majority are, especially the women. There's one, so brightly made up she looks like a parrot, who always shows up with a little Pomeranian in her arms. Except for worrying about her little dog, you'd think she hadn't a thought in her head. All she does is laugh and chatter away like ~~an idiot~~ ^{a fool}. On those rare occasions when the conversation turns to politics, she pompously announces, "I've always said it's because of bad administration." Before meeting the man from Melilla, I felt more secure the nights the fleet bombarded us, but now I understand that they have shells almost as big as bombs, and their aim is better too. He says they blew entire buildings sky-high in the European quarter in Melilla. And don't think he's not a republican. He's as republican as we are. I asked him how he could be after living through that horror, and he

sighed and replied, "What else can we be?"

And that's why I feel like throwing up when I see those photos plastered on walls, those children's faces that shrapnel turned into death masks. They were children from Madrid, who'd been sent to Barcelona to escape the bombings. I don't know why, but at the time we thought they'd be safe here. They were staying in the monastery beside Saint Philip Neri's Church. Now the monastery's in ruins, and the church's facade is pitted as if by smallpox. When I pass by, I always stop for a moment in the square and stare at it.

I look at what's left of that monastery and think of the Holy Innocents, not the ones in the Bible but all of them: all the innocents sacrificed in the history of the world by their bloodthirsty elders.

Why should we have a good time evoking and remembering our childhoods, Juli? Wouldn't that make us frivolous and selfish when we never knew the delights that we--yes, all of us--offer the children of today? The first time I went to look at that monastery was shortly after the bombing. The newspapers were full of photos of mangled children. Then I went on to the cathedral, which is so close by, and I sat down on one of those stone benches on either side of the monument to those who died in the war against Napoleon, outside the door to the cloister, where I hadn't sat since one November evening when we both sat down there. I'm sure you don't remember, but I'll never forget it. It was back when we took those endless strolls through the old city with stacks of the ~~unsaleable~~ ^{sell} Blast under our arms. We were tired of walking and sat down on one of those benches.

And you told me about your childhood. Without realizing, you were obsessed by it. You told me about your aunt for the first time. Up till then I hadn't known whom you lived with, if you lived with anyone. Then

I found out that you were an orphan, that you'd never known your parents, that you'd always lived with a maiden aunt, your father's sister, and that you and she were the only surviving members of the Soleràs family. You told me about that maiden aunt with such emotion, such fervor; it was all so unexpected. You've never talked about her again as you did that day. It was a wet November evening, and we watched those sanctimonious old biddies entering the church to light candles to the Christ of Lepanto while others came out, having finished their prayers--and you spoke rapturously (yes, rapturously!) about your maiden aunt, whom you've never mentioned since except scornfully or ironically and who was also very devoted to that Christ who even then had always made my hair stand on end.

I gathered (since I've never met your aunt) that in your childhood you'd been entranced by her. I can't think of any other word to convey the impression you made that evening. You told me that as a child, you'd lived for her endless, fantastic stories, that nothing made you as happy as having the flu, because every time you came down with it she'd spend hours and hours keeping you company and telling you stories. That even now, you said, the word "happiness" meant having the flu, blissfully sick in bed with a fever--though not too high a fever. "I've never known anyone," you said, "with so much imagination. Her imagination, like some monstrous plant, had grown at the expense of all her other faculties and strangled them. As soon as I felt a little feverish, I knew what joy was in store for me: reality would be abolished! Yes, reality was abolished with the first cup of tea she made me drink, because after that tea came those incredible stories she'd make up on the spot. Later, when I was older, the first time I heard about opium and its effects I could only imagine it as a kind of rock candy, since my aunt would always sweeten her ineffable teas

with rock candy."

As you told me about your aunt, the drizzle soaked the pile of Blasts we'd left on the bench beside us. You told me that through your aunt's stories, it was as though you'd experienced every era of history in your youth: successively a caveman, a martyr in the catacombs, a Knight Templar, and a hero of the Vendée, "because naturally," you explained, "my aunt favors the Vendée." And you added, "What a pity we're anarchists! We could bring back the Vendée or even the Knights Templars in all their glory! I've often thought ~~that~~ all the world's ills came from suppressing the Templars. Anyhow, I think we could have more fun pretending we're underground Templars than anarchists. There's no comparison: reactionaries have much more imagination; and besides, the past is on their side. Since the future is pure nonexistence, they ~~give~~ ^{leave} it to those without imagination. Yes, Trini, you need a lot of imagination to be a reactionary, and that's why there are so few of them. The only true example I've known is my aunt."

I was astonished at what you'd said. It was the first time anyone had spoken ~~sympathetically~~ ^{affectionately} about reactionaries, I mean the first time I'd heard them spoken of as real people. How could there have even been reactionaries if they'd been the way I'd always heard them described?

"Geoffrey of Bouillon," you went on, "would look like a Jacobin beside her. He's as familiar to me as she is. My aunt talks about Geoffrey of Bouillon as though he were the only man she'd ever met."

We talked about our childhoods then with ironic complacency, as though they were far behind us and we'd been through a lot. You were seventeen and I was fourteen. That evening you said, "Someday we'll blush to think we once were seventeen years old." "Why?" I asked in amazement. "Because it's an idiotic age. Imagine: we're the future! Pure nonexistence!"

We're still nothing, yet we've already betrayed ourselves a thousand times!"

"How have we betrayed ourselves?" "Once when we were sitting around after lunch, my aunt told me it was a shame I'd grown up when we'd been so happy together--she said--when I was five years old. 'We'll never be that happy again,' she assured me. At the moment, I felt annoyed. How could she expect me not to grow up? Well, Trini, since then I've thought it over and it no longer seems so monstrous. My aunt's right. Like Jesus Christ."

"Jesus Christ?"

"Yes, Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ and my aunt. Wasn't it Jesus Christ who said, 'Except ye become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven'? Listen, Trini: I've thought it over a lot since the day when my aunt made that odd comment, and the more I think about it the righter she seems. And now I'm telling you because I feel like it. Maybe I'll never tell you again, not because I won't think it but because I won't be in the mood. For example, I'll never tell my aunt, even though it would be so easy and would make her so happy. On the other hand, what's the use of seeing things so clearly if we can't do anything about them? The spirit of childhood: who's got the courage to go back? When even those of us who see it clearly can't and won't! Maybe saints, but certainly not all of them . . . Now we blather on about how we'll never betray our youth, how we'll always be true to it. And yet we've already betrayed our childhood! After that betrayal, why shouldn't we betray and deny our youth too when the time comes? The great betrayal is already consummated. The cock hasn't crowed and we've denied Him three times."

But now, Juli, I beg you with all my heart: let's not stir up more childhood memories! I find it a painful subject, though I'm not quite sure why. Maybe because of what I told you: that I see what it's like now and

feel guilty because ours were so peaceful by comparison. Maybe because of what you said that evening, that at the age of seventeen we'd already betrayed our childhoods and were forever condemned to be that hateful thing: grownups. What I can tell you is that I've never known anyone so able to identify with a child, to be a child with him. How well you know how to amuse Ramonet, to put yourself on his level, to enter the illogical, mysterious world of children ruled by laws so different from ours. He listens in fascination as you weave stories and more stories. Then he tells me I don't know how to tell them, and it's true that I don't have your knack. Would you believe it: I bought a book called The Art of Storytelling, by a woman I'm told is a great educational expert, and I've studied it very seriously. But woe is us, when to practice an art we have to learn the rules. Art should be like love, which can only be taught by our instincts. "Except ye become as little children . . ." I'm sure that sums up the art of storytelling, but how hard it is to learn!

September 10

Your letter arrived just at the right time; it seemed like an act of Providence.

X This morning the mailman ~~had~~⁹ brought me one from Lluís in Sierra Calva. The most affectionate letter he'd ever written. He ended it by asking me to marry him.

24 I felt as happy as someone who'd ~~won~~⁵ a battle he'd ~~staked~~⁵ his whole life on. What a fool I am!

The mailman came back at midday. Your letter stunned me.

X I had to shut myself in my room so the ~~kid~~^{boy} wouldn't see me. Lying on my bed with my head buried in the pillow, I tried to cry. Impossible. All I felt was a terrible dryness.

Now I feel empty, but at least I'm calm. Dry and empty, but calm.

Your letter came just in the nick of time, and I'm grateful to you for it. How much worse it would be if we were married! And even so, you ask me if you did the right thing in telling me everything!

How lucky that I'm not tied to Lluís forever! Could I love him more than I've loved him? What a wretch, who doesn't know how to return another's love! Could I have needed him more, given him more than what I've given him? You saved me from a cross, poor Juli: one of those crosses that crush you with ridicule.

From now on, all he'll be is the father of my son. Apart from that, he'll be a stranger to me. Once a month, I'll write him a short, polite note telling him how his son--who by chance is also mine--is doing. By pure chance; nothing more! And Ramonet will always be my "natural son," just like his mother, and it hasn't hurt me any! It doesn't bother me; why should it bother him?

X
X
I couldn't express in words how much your affection means to me at this moment. Without you I'd feel so alone, so terribly alone, that maybe I'd end up in a madhouse. Loneliness frightens me, I don't know how to cope with stand it. If someone saw me now, he'd think, "She looks like a typical, dried-out old maid. This woman's never known what love is!" I know that's what my face looks like. I've been looking at myself in the mirror for a long time.

September 12

Your arguments to prove I'm free to marry whomever I like seem very odd. Of course I'm free! Why do you tell me? Do you think I don't know? It's my one consolation. I'm single, obviously. Why do you remind me?

I'm free and single, not tied to him by anything. That's the bright side of my misfortune, and thanks to this stroke of luck I don't feel crushed by the ridiculousness of my situation. But marry someone else? At the very least--I don't know how to put it--it's an outlandish idea. Whom? I'm not interested in Lluís, but I'm even less interested in other men. Who could this other man be? Such a farfetched idea never entered my mind. How could I give Ramonet a stepfather?

For years I've lived like a fool on dreams that someday Lluís and I would formalize our relationship and be man and wife in the eyes of God and our fellow men. Now I don't give a damn. Bah, nothing in this life's worth getting upset about. Do I have the right to tragically bemoan the ridiculous incidents in my private life after all the horrors we've lived through, are living through, and are going to live through for months and years to come? Our country devastated, so many families destroyed, so many innocents killed on one side and the other, and I'm going to make a fuss because Lluís betrayed me? God might punish me; and I can tell you, Juli, with all my heart, that I'm more grateful than ever to you for opening my eyes to another life free of this one's grotesque absurdity. I always keep that Bible you gave me years ago, before the war, on my table. It still has your bookmark in it. All I have to do is open it to find those words you underlined in red. "To whom shall ~~we~~ go?" I went with Lluís, and you can see where he led me. You can see, ~~poor~~ Juli!

If Lluís had died in battle, do you think I'd have wanted to remarry? You know me better than that. In any case, I beg you not to tell him anything I write to you. Don't tell him how upset I am. Don't try to fix what's broken. Don't tell him how unhappy I am. A woman deceived and also unhappy is doubly ludicrous. And I don't want to be ludicrous in his eyes. I won't be fucked with anymore! Yes: fucked with. Let's call things

by their names! I'm not a nun; I'm the natural daughter of a couple of anarchists who practice free love! He's not going to fuck with me anymore! But marry someone else? What a shocking idea!

September 15

Your letter, which I just received, made me cry, but I couldn't tell you if they were tears of happiness, sadness, or what.

"A peaceful, trusting love, like that between a brother and a sister." Is it possible? To have you near, as you always have been, my only friend and true brother, in the future as in the past and, if you like, from now on more than ever, seems more than natural. It seems crucial. But Juli, wouldn't going further be . . . incestuous?

Forgive me; I've always loved you so much as a brother!

And besides, if you could imagine the bad taste this thing called love has left in my mouth: a dark tempest where faces blur till they stop being human to expiate the crime of having tried to get too close . . .

X
2X I've been making plans these last few days. I'll complete my unfinished studies in geology. I'll apply for a teaching job. I've already started the wheels turning. The science department's offered me Maria Engràcia Bosch's position as teaching assistant in crystallography. So you can see how much her decision to go live with her relatives in the country helped me. They'll overlook the fact that I still don't have my bachelor's degree and that crystallography isn't exactly my specialty. They can't be too fussy in wartime. There's such a shortage of professors! I already wrote to Maria Engràcia (because the last thing I'd want is to occupy her place without her express consent), and I'll have to start teaching next month, when the new school year begins: that is, three weeks from now. Your letter caught me in the midst of a frenzy of

preparation, leafing through thick volumes I'd almost forgotten, erudite treatises that had been gathering dust on a bookshelf ~~from which they~~ hadn't ~~budged~~ since Lluís and I started living together in this house in Pedralbes.

At one point in my life, I'd hated those books, when time's abyss had suddenly seemed meaningless to me. Now, on the contrary, I find them a sort of consolation, a tranquilizer: our domestic squabbles, our ridiculous chagrins de ménage, seem so trivial on this scale. Our poor bones, if by some extraordinary accident they turn into fossils instead of dust the wind bloweth where it listeth, would be so insignificant--so insignificant buried beneath ten miles of sediment . . .

If a hundred million years from now, a professor of geology like me discovers some petrified bones, the last vestiges of myself and Lluís, how could ~~she~~ ^{he} guess, and what would ~~she~~ ^{he} care, if we were happy or unhappy, models of fidelity or outrageously cuckolded? How could ~~she~~ ^{he} guess and what would ~~she~~ ^{he} care, this geology professor, about my story with Lluís?

That's not much of a consolation, you'll say. It's certainly not what you'd call a happy thought, but what can one do? Excuse me for chattering on about geology, which I know has never interested you. Right now I'm up to my eyeballs in it. I'd like to be entirely independent of Lluís, have my own income, to be--with all its consequences but also with all its satisfactions--a single mother. A single mother who doesn't have to rely on her son's father for anything, who can hold her head up high. And you can only hold your head up high if you're independent. That's what I'm planning to be.

My only doubt is about this house. He deeded it to me and Ramonet. Should I give it back and spit in his face: I don't want anything from you? But if I did so, wouldn't I be harming Ramonet? Wouldn't I be

blinded by pride, which is always a bad counselor? Wouldn't it be right and just for me to keep it as compensation for all the pain he's caused me for so many years? You're a lawyer; advise me. Could I, for example, deed my part of it to my son--who's his son and the sole grandchild of his dead mother, whose house this was--and thus calm my misgivings? Tell me if I could reserve the use of the part that's mine; after all, I have a right to a little shelter in this world. I'd like your advice. In this, you see, in this matter of the house in Pedralbes, I'll do whatever you say, whatever you think right and fitting.

But as for the other part . . . whether you and I should marry . . . your other proposal . . . what good would it do, my God? I'm afraid we'd end up losing. We'd ruin our friendship, such a wonderful friendship that's beginning to go back so many years--I was fourteen when I met you and now I'm going on twenty-two . . . This friendship that's sustained me in the past and today, that keeps me from feeling hopelessly alone. Hopelessly alone! There's also Ramonet, of course; but as I've told you before, a kid's not much company. Kids don't keep you company; you have to keep them company.

X I'm trying to imagine our friendship changed into something else and . . . I can't do it. Forgive me, Juli: I don't mean to offend you, but it's precisely because I admire you so much that your proposal seems absurd to me. You're too intelligent, and love is a jungle. A pair of wild ^{animals} ~~beasts~~ howling above an abyss.

At this moment, love appalls me.

When I think of your hand, so expressive when you gesture in conversation or argument, but so unable to grasp anything, too white and too nervous--your hand clasping mine, I feel shocked, as by some monstrous crime against nature. I owe it to you to be honest. I'd like to

love you with all my soul, but with nothing more than my soul. And yet, I feel that loving only with the soul isn't loving, that a love like that would be worthless because it would be too easy. And then I feel that I love you more than this, but I'm confused.

X Or maybe it's that I'm not enough of a woman, that I'm too childish and too old at the same time, like certain fruits that don't ripen, green one day and rotten the next! I'm scared that the harm Lluís did me has marked me forever. He's hurt me from the day I met him, from the day he hugged and kissed me on that bench on the landing. For me, that first kiss was a brutal revelation, however much it made me almost faint with happiness. Yes, a brutal revelation. He's hurt me since the first day; he's always hurt me! His disgraceful adventure with that feudal lady in Olivet, "the prettiest and most novelistic woman in Aragon," as you put it in your letter, wouldn't matter. It was nothing more than a sudden ~~beam~~ ^{flash} of light that made me see and understand. In its pitiless brilliance, I suddenly understood that he never loved me and I never loved him; that what I loved in him was his youth, his power, his impulsiveness, his animalism-- everything that now revolts me.

X Now I want to tell you something I've never told you before. Lluís, to degrade you in my eyes, often would tell me certain details about things you said and did that, at the very least, were odd. Even now, in some of the infrequent letters he's written since he joined your brigade, he's told me all sorts of things about you . . . I remember something about a cave where he said you were reading some book about Charlemagne or maybe Roland . . . and ~~so much~~ ^{lots of} other nonsense that I often couldn't even understand. I never worried about whether any of what Lluís said and wrote was true or not, since it was about you . . . and since it was him! When he's not wicked, it's out of laziness.

X What I believe with all my heart is that you've always been good to me and always will be. I know you won't hurt me. And I'm terrified of being alone in this world, lost without anyone to keep me company. I need you and I trust you absolutely. I trust you, and I abandon myself to this trust. You decide; I'll do whatever you say.

And besides, you love Ramonet so much. I'm sure you'd never be a stepfather to him. Yesterday we opened the last crate of cans of condensed milk. Would you believe I've saved all the others, empty, as a keepsake. I'd thought of keeping them all my life in memory of these hard times. Of course they're in the way . . . One of these days they'll end up in the fireplace, poor things, but I wanted to wait till you were here to burn them. To burn them all together, these crates that always remind me of your thoughtfulness. Who knows? The way things are going, maybe when we hear them crackling merrily among the flames while we sit in those two armchairs by the fire, you and I will be man and wife!

Who knows . . .

X One thing I can tell you right now from my heart: that I was very moved to discover, suddenly, that you're even more thoughtful and delicate than I'd imagined. Your silence during all those^e years . . .

PART THREE

His uncle, who was a bishop, was surprised to see him wasting his time on astronomy.

Life of Copernicus

As for me, I understood too late that God had wanted to teach me a hard lesson. Those of my estate are never very cautious. When we think we've sealed all the cracks, the subtlest one remains: pride. We risk taking our most ~~secret~~ weaknesses for virtuous impulses. Every time we're called, we think it's by Grace, and sometimes we think we're angels sent by Providence when we're actually flying straight to perdition.

When, when will we accept this truth: that in this world's desert, we can expect no company but God's? Solitude is our daily bread; and a hard bread it is.

Doctor Gallifa, at the seminary, once told me that the worst temptations come not in our youth, as one would think, but when we're ^{over} past fifty. It's then that we feel our utter aloneness; when the heart begins to harden and grieves for a tenderness it's never known, a lack of love, ^{is} the heaviest burden we must bear in this exile. Nothing weighs on us as much as emptiness.

A cup of tea by the fire ^{while} ~~when~~ November winds stir dead leaves and the scent of wet earth drifts in from the garden; a cup of tea by the fire, a look of understanding between two people . . . O God, deliver me from ^{these} ~~this~~ wicked ^{regrets} ~~sorrow~~!

#

Monsignor Pinell de Bray lived in Paris but often stayed at my aunt's house in Barcelona. He was a bishop in partibus infidelium, of Samarkand if I'm not mistaken. I remember him as though he were standing here before me, moving among the Louis XV furniture with the indolence of an Angora cat. He was tall and slender, and his extremely white hair set off his youthful, ruddy face, whose eyes glowed as softly and reassuringly as a

X dying fire. He spoke to me in the condescending tone we employ with children ~~who haven't reached the age of reason~~ ^{too young to}. I was twelve years old at the time--my aunt, to reward my good grades, had just given me that telescope--and some of his veiled, velvety phrases, full of vague allusions to things I couldn't understand, made me think of certain passages in the Apocalypse, which I'd just read for the first time. My aunt listened to him as to an oracle.

Monsignor Pinell de Bray was, in fact, our family oracle. My aunt, who was his cousin, always held him up to me as an example. I felt proud to belong to a family Heaven had blessed with such an illustrious member.

2X It's as if I were seeing it now: that hushed, shadowy drawing room whose gilded furniture glowed amid heavy red velvet curtains; as if I were seeing him, so graceful, so ascetic, with his modest smile, so reserved, as though ~~he~~ ^I could ~~feel~~ ^{hear} his voice, grave and gentle as the low notes on a grand piano with the soft pedal held down. It was 1931. Some of his phrases come back to me: the recent catastrophe, the reestablishment of the kingdom of God . . . He made veiled allusions to mysterious visitors he received in his elegant apartment on the Champs Elysées. But at the time I couldn't understand such enigmas. I was too young. My aunt, who had reasons ~~for~~ ^{to} understanding him better, was scared at times. "But you're taking great risks . . ." He smiled gently, modestly. "We should be risking our lives for the ~~Good~~ ^{Just} Cause." Sometimes he'd refer to our cardinal with unctuous pity, "A man of limited vision, a weak character . . ." But at that time I was very innocent and remained so until much later.

Now I know that the atrocities committed in His name are infinitely worse than those committed against His name.

#

Once I'd finished my studies, I went to live in an industrial town on

X the outskirts of Barcelona dominated by the Remy Mura factory's gray mass. At night its four hundred windows, a hundred on each side, looked like so many eyes scrutinizing every nook and cranny in that neighborhood of shacks. The fortune possessed by Mr. Creus, who now pronounced his name "Kroitz," had been a direct result of our ^{defeat -} catastrophe. This remarkable way of pronouncing his name was by no means unique in that era. I should add that it wasn't till the end of 1945 that he gave up "Kroitz" and returned to "Creus." According to him, a genealogist (during those years genealogists were coining it hand over fist) had researched the matter in 1939 and had arrived--precipitously, as it turned out--at the conclusion that he was of German origin, but the one at the end of 1945, after a more thorough investigation, leaned toward the hypothesis that "Creus" might mean something similar to "Cruces" in Castilian, so that it was highly likely that Mr. Creus was descended from Geoffrey of Bouillon in person.

He'd already had a factory before, but it was hardly more than a metalworking shop like hundreds in Barcelona. He'd had about fifty men on his payroll. Without the calamity, he couldn't have even dreamed of achieving his current grandeur. In 1936, like so many others, he'd had to flee the country. He hasn't forgotten, he'll never forget that during three years his factory, converted for war production, was run by "Reds," as he calls them. It wasn't collectivized by the anarchists. The autonomous government assured that it kept operating amid the hurricane. Upon his return, Mr. Creus or Kroitz (let's remember that he didn't abandon this pronunciation till the end of 1945), found it equipped with latest-model Skoda machinery and enlarged by the addition of four ^{new} ~~new~~ and enormous ^{new} ~~new~~ wings. ^{sheds} He felt no scruples about appropriating these unexpected improvements. As soon as he was again seated in his easy chair in the

X

manager's office, his first decision was to offer generous bundles of shares to three or four people whose sense of tactics and strategy had led them to situate themselves at the crossroads between official prices and the black market. After everything he'd had to suffer, what more fitting reward than to buy at fixed prices and sell at whatever price he liked? Like all miracles, it was wonderfully simple. Mr. Creus didn't have much trouble taking his company, already improved by Czech machinery, to truly dizzying heights.

Add to that an ear-splitting advertising campaign. Ads for Remy Mury sprouted everywhere, as if by magic. Immense, multicolored, astounding, magnificent posters. The great, indispensable Llibert Milmany had put his two cents' worth in. It was he who suggested that they could increase their business by manufacturing beauty products for ladies. Later he realized that times had changed and they could sell them to men too. Our brilliant comrade Llibert Milmany (more a comrade than ever ^{under} in the new ^{regime} era), knew how to adapt all the tricks he'd learned as chief of war propaganda to the new situation. Barcelona hadn't forgotten those posters saying "Build tanks, tanks, tanks!" and others worthy of eternal memory. A brilliant comrade! Now they were covered by others, bigger, more striking, and more imperative: "No more baldness!", "Away with unneeded fuzz!", "Take ^{good} care of your armpits!"

Grateful to Divine Providence, Mr. Creus decided to dedicate his factory to the Sacred Heart. Not only that, but he decided to make the Sacred Heart a shareholder in the enterprise. Since so singular a shareholder couldn't attend meetings or collect dividends, it was decided that Monsignor Pinell de Bray would represent it. It was my relative who blessed the factory, sprinkling the Czech machinery with abundant holy water. From then on, there was one reception and soiree after another at

the Creuses' castle, for the Creuses now lived in a painstakingly restored Gothic castle. Though their roots were pure Catalan, from the moment they changed their name to Kroitz they spoke nothing but Castilian. One of Mr. Kroitz's most dazzling parties was to celebrate his admission into the Order of the Holy Sepulcher. At the time, nobility was all the rage.

The popular magazines published photos of that party, which caused a sensation. I kept some of them, along with others from the period that I look at from time to time to make sure I didn't dream it all. In one of them, Mr. and Mrs. Creus are surrounded by their guests, all wearing party hats and blowing noisemakers, doubled over with laughter and clearly showing the effects of copious libations. Nothing was considered as refined in that era--one of desperate poverty for most people--as frivolity. The saddest aspect of the party, since we're talking about the Holy Sepulcher, was that sometimes a cardinal would come from Rome to preside over the admission of a new knight or lady. In the Kroitzes' case, there was no cardinal from Rome, so they had to make do with Monsignor Pinell de Bray, but the frivolity went pretty far. He says that in the course of that soiree, couples, some young and some older, would discreetly disappear from time to time and only reappear after a prolonged hiatus. What I know myself is that Mrs. Creus had all the rooms in their castle locked from then on as a precautionary measure whenever they threw a party. The poor lady, despite everything, had retained some of her principles from before the war.

#

I should mention that the Creuses had a daughter who at that time was going on fifteen. For her birthday, which was at the beginning of summer, they threw a garden party. The main event at that party was supposed to be a "mock battle" in which, instead of confetti and

streamers, the guests bombarded each other with pastries filled with custard and whipped cream. According to persistent rumors, the idea came from our brilliant propagandist Llibert Milmany. It seems he thought they'd benefit from the scandal and was sure that Remy Mura's standing would soar with the news of that pastry-bacchanal, almost unbelievable in those ^{times.} ~~days~~ Everyone in Barcelona heard about it. For a while it was all people talked about, and even Solidaridad Nacional felt obliged to denounce him. *

I'd hardly ever seen the Creuses' daughter, because they didn't usually attend Mass in the church near their factory. I'd only had one conversation with her. Then I'd been stunned by her ignorance of everything that had happened in her country a few years back. She hadn't the slightest idea of what Catalonia had been like before the war. When I tried to tell her, she stared at me as though I were crazy. I tried to make her understand that before there'd been enough bread for everyone, that you could buy it in any bakery without a ration card and without standing in line. She looked at me, shaking her head in dismay. "But what chaos!" she exclaimed.

Twenty years later, someone might think I was making all this up. I swear that those were her exact words. I don't think she was mentally retarded. She thought it was very chic to be cheerfully unconcerned ^{about} ~~with~~ anything except herself. In particular, she thought it was very feminine. "Oh, politics!" she'd say, making a face, and for her anything that wasn't fun was "politics." Moreover, her friends had the same attitude, and they were by no means female, as became clear later. The life that girl led was as empty as it was busy, always ~~in the company of a crowd of pals who~~ ^{surrounded by friends} whisked her off in their fast cars to all kinds of idiotic entertainments.

One afternoon, she showed up unexpectedly at the rectory. She looked stunned.

X She stared at me in silence. "Speak," I said to her. Two tears trickled from her unblinking eyes, while her face showed no emotion at all.

"Mother wants to take me to ^athe doctor . . . I ran away!"

After this sudden outburst, her eyes again became appallingly arid. Silence fell again.

"I don't understand," I muttered. "You're young, attractive, fabulously rich. I can't understand why he wouldn't want to . . ."

"There were seven of them,"--and she laughed nervously while her eyes stared straight at me--"seven."

It was a mechanical laugh. Her hands were trembling, she couldn't control them, while her appallingly dry eyes stared at me and that nervous laugh shook her body as though someone were tickling the soles of her feet.

I promised I'd see Mrs. Creus and get that murderous idea out of her head. But an hour later they'd set out for France in her mother's huge Cadillac, accompanied by the family doctor.

A few months later, they were again throwing lavish parties at the castle. I was astonished to find out she'd married Llibert Milmany. He'd easily obtained an annulment of his previous marriage to a vaudeville vedette during the war. After the war, civil marriages were considered null and void. Many who weren't single got married as if they were, using the excuse that their civil marriages were invalid. This outrage lasted a long time. Llibert Milmany used it to rid himself of that disreputable vaudeville singer who now embarrassed him and hindered his rise in society.

#

Now I live in a mountain village with less than two hundred inhabitants.

I fled that industrial town. I'm a coward. In fact, Monsignor Pinell de

Bray saw it all clearly, "This industrial-town business is just a phase; he'll
grow out of
get over it." And yet, I owe my victory over my aunt to Monsignor Pinell

de Bray. My aunt . . . When did I start finding her so repulsive? I have

only a very vague memory of my own mother. I was four years old when

~~they sent me to live~~ ^{d. I wanted to live} with my aunt--and however far back I go, I can

remember this instinctive repulsion. Later, when I was eight or nine, it

began to be mixed with admiration. It was a dark, complex feeling, similar

to that provoked by a mummified saint. She was always involved in good

works. At that time she was concentrating on Aid to Vocations for

Ecclesiastics, which she usually called by its initials: AVE. After lunch,

she'd explain how the organization--of which she was the factotum--was

evolving. "Admirable," the bishop in partibus infidelium would exclaim,

raising his cup of Colombian coffee to his nose and breathing in its

intense aroma. My aunt was an expert at making very strong coffee, which

we always drank from little cups. The monsignor sipped it, holding the

cup's handle between his thumb and index finger and ostentatiously raising

his pinky. After eating, he tended to get the hiccups. After each hiccup

he'd dab his mouth with his fine cambric handkerchief. He did everything

with exquisite grace, with refined manners that seemed out of place in our

century. He'd say "Excuse me" once his hiccup had passed, and the

conversation resumed.

"Admirable. AVE is a holy undertaking if there ever was one. "

After my aunt had given me that portable telescope (I'd gotten A's in

three courses in my sophomore year of high school, and the telescope was

my reward), I'd spend a couple of hours every evening on the roof,

looking at the moon and planets. When the monsignor found out, he joked

about it. "It's a good thing he'll get over it. No one ever made a career

out of gazing at the moon." And laying aside the foolery appropriate to my

X tender age and unworthy of his attention, he returned to AVE, to that
"holy undertaking" ~~that~~ my aunt had begun. She'd begun it, she was at
pains to point out, not for the love of mankind but for love of her
Creator. "I know some of the poor seminarists we give scholarships to will
not make worthy priests, but that doesn't matter. I'm doing it for God."
What God, what God, O Lord, but one she'd created in her imagination and
according to her own taste and who was nothing but an unconscious
idealization of herself? "It's a holy undertaking," our illustrious relative
insisted, and my aunt blushed and lowered her eyes. She cited statistics
and more statistics: the number of parishes without priests, industrial ^{neighborhoods} ~~areas~~
without ^{churches} ~~vicars~~. She knew the number of students who entered seminaries
each year in all the bishoprics in Catalonia: a number that declined from
year to year--a decline she attributed to the republic, though it had begun
long before.

X "No one feels the call," the monsignor summed it up, ecstatically
savoring the aroma of his cup of coffee. ^{There} ~~There~~ are fewer and fewer
vocations."

X AVE put up ^g ~~small~~ posters all over the city, reminding everyone of
the lack of vocations and requesting donations to create scholarships for
poor seminarists. How many tables my aunt set up in the street, how many
bingo games she organized for this purpose! One of her favorite strategies
was showing up, very plainly dressed, at the best houses in Sarrià. If the
maid didn't recognize her, the trick worked. "Tell the lady of the house a
poor woman has come to beg for charity and wants to see her in person."
The lady would appear and would immediately recognize her. It was
touching, edifying.

X When I'd reached the age of twelve, she granted me the honor of
assisting ^g ~~her~~ in her "works." I typed hundreds, thousands of addresses. My

X aunt sent out incredible numbers of letters, circulars, and prospectuses,
X always compelled by her obsession: that there weren't enough priests
weren't enough ~~vicans~~. This obsession tormented her, and she passed it on
to me. I felt so sad sometimes, thinking of all those souls lost because
X there weren't enough priests. I couldn't ~~imagine that a soul might be lost~~ ^{figure out how I could}
through the fault of another, which in reality is a very knotty problem. In
any case, my aunt's error wasn't that she wrestled with it, since the
problem does exist, but that she thought it could have such a clear,
simplistic, automatic solution. For her, souls were lost through the lack of
priests to care for them, just as one can miss a train because no one's at
the ticket window. She couldn't conceive that anyone would board a train
anyway. And yet . . . and yet, so many people have ~~climbed~~ ^{climbed} aboard
anyway, starting with Demas, the first who rode without a ticket!

Since she couldn't conceive of boarding a train in such a
"disreputable" fashion, for her the whole problem was to buy a ticket, and
thus there had to be plenty of clerks ready to sell them. She took it for
granted that there were first, second, and third-class tickets. In her
condescension toward the poor, which she underlined with her cloying
smile and abundant diminutives, my aunt would have even have made
allowance for fourth-class travelers. "We have to give them a chance,"
she often said; a chance to buy a ticket on the Heaven-and-Earth line.
When everyone had a chance, when there wasn't a single hamlet without a
priest, only through diabolical wickedness would anyone miss the train.

2X The admiration I felt for her non-stop activity had gradually erased
that instinctive repulsion I'd felt toward her in my early childhood. My
aunt possessed, among other properties, an apartment house on Balmes
Street, near the Diagonal. For us, the concierge in that building was "the
concierge" par excellence ~~ob~~ ^Obliging and devoted, she often ~~came to visit us~~ ^{visited} us

in Sarrià. She had a son not much older than I was. One day she brought him along and told us he was going to enter a seminary. With a scholarship from AVE, moreover. Deeply moved, my aunt put her arms around him, saying "You've chosen the highest calling. Even the angels will envy you . . ." I was a witness to that touching scene. My aunt even cried as she embraced the concierge's son.

That night I couldn't sleep. My aunt's tears, the concierge's excitement, the happy look on the boy's face: everything swirled around in my brain. The idea burst upon me suddenly and seemed so obvious. I felt ashamed not to have had it earlier. How unworthy I'd been of an aunt like mine! Unable to close my eyes, I impatiently waited for day to break. My aunt's always been an early riser.

She stared at me in amazement. "What's wrong with you?" She hadn't had time to comb her hair. I expected her to take me in her arms like the concierge's son, her tears mingling with mine.

"But . . ." I could see she was upset. "Anyway, we'll talk about it later. I don't think you have a very clear idea of how things are."

Shortly thereafter, Monsignor Pinell de Bray came from Paris and stayed awhile at our house.

"The boy wants to be a priest," my aunt told him, "a priest in a working-class neighborhood."

X She spoke in the indulgent tone she so often used: the same cloying tone she used in speaking to the poor, pretending to be interested in their homes, their children. God Almighty: how often You could call us to task for our diminutives, for our ~~ostentatious~~ ^{pretentious} condescension!

Monsignor Pinell de Bray looked at me, half amused and half concerned.

X "We'll have to discuss it," my aunt added, ^{but} ~~and~~ not in front of him,

of course."

I felt annoyed. I wasn't crazy. So why had my aunt told the bishop in partibus infidelium about my decision in that tone of pitying irony? I stationed myself behind the door. I wanted to listen to that conversation. I heard the monsignor's insinuating, velvety voice.

"Sometimes poor priests go farthest. I know one, the son of some sharecroppers on the Baron of Albi's estates, who's now a canon in Tarragona. He'll get over that nonsense about a working-class neighborhood, just as he'll get over his telescope. It's just teenage foolishness. He'll have plenty of time to think it over before he finishes high school. His idea isn't as harebrained as you think. Most active bishops come from the secular clergy, not from religious orders . . ."

At that time a bishop in partibus infidelium had more prestige than an active one, because in fact many of the latter had been "poor priests," as the monsignor put it. But I didn't feel at all inclined to "go farthest." The expression disgusted me. I kept listening behind the door.

"I'm telling you again, Llúcia. The boy's idea isn't as wild as you think. A secular priest can hold onto his money, since he doesn't take a vow of poverty, whereas if he became a Jesuit as you'd like . . ."

"There are more important things than money," my aunt interrupted. "I myself am giving everything I've got to the poor."

#

And so God plunged me into solitude. Till the war I hadn't a single friend, till I met Soleràs. I had plenty of companions, but I was hungry for a friend. Not friends; a friend. Without quite knowing how, when I still hadn't had my twentieth birthday, I found I'd joined the Catalan Army. I'd gone to give blood at a hospital during those dreadful days in July 1936. Then I was a nurse, a paramedic, and one fine day they

X assigned me to a brigade in the thirtieth division as a second lieutenant in the medical corps. I felt comfortable in that brigade at the front. Why not? It had been a regular, militarized brigade right from the start. The soldiers' ideas and sentiments were basically similar to mine, and they were good people. Why shouldn't I have loved them? Weren't they my fellow men? Since then, people have asked me more than once whether I was unaware that while we were at the front, in the rear they were burning churches and ~~beating up~~ ^{hell - murdering} priests. We weren't unaware of it; it was impossible not to know. At the time we didn't realize how many they were killing during that summer, but we knew they were killing some. We weren't unaware of it, but for us it was as if a plague had broken out. You don't renounce your own country because it's ravaged by a plague. We were caught in the crossfire, and we knew it.

When people ask what I was doing with the "Reds," when I sometimes ask myself (because I've also wondered about it, and indeed I wondered during the war), I always end up giving the same answer: I couldn't do anything else. Above and beyond all the mixed-up ideological pretexts, there was a geographical division. For the vast majority--of whom I was one--who didn't know anything about politics, there was this and perhaps nothing else. We were republicans because the area where we were, where we'd been born, was republican; if we'd been born on the other side, we'd have fought on that side. It's true that some people fled from one side to the other. I myself, as I'll explain, was about to do so, like Soleràs, like so many, but the vast majority fought beneath the flags that geographical division had assigned to them. That's how it was for the vast majority, and maybe that's how it always is in wars. In any case, I can say that if anyone was ashamed of the church-burnings, the killings, the disorders of every sort in the republican rear, if anyone was especially ashamed of

them, it was us.

I can't really speak of anything except our brigade, the only one I was well acquainted with. I can say that at times, especially at the beginning, we talked about getting together with other regular brigades and marching on Barcelona to put an end to those anarchist gangs that were ravaging our country. Someday the obscure mysteries of anarchism will be unraveled. Right now, all we know is that they did everything possible to lose the war.

I remember that at the beginning, not long after I'd volunteered, there was open talk among officers and heads of brigades about a coup a general and some colonels were planning to rid the streets of Barcelona of arsonists, thieves, and murderers. The names of famous military men--Guarner, Farràs, Escofet--filtered down through the ranks, and we were all in favor. But it couldn't be done without leaving the front undefended.

I remember a meeting of all the officers in our brigade (right at the beginning of the war) at which Soleràs spoke. Some argued in favor of that "march on Barcelona," but others raised the main objection: that the fascists would pour through the gap we left in the lines. With the lucidity that made him so many enemies because it was irritating, he prophesied that if we let the rear "go to hell," we'd lose the war. Someone interrupted to remind him that an officer couldn't use such defeatist language, that defeatism ~~in an officer~~ carried the death penalty. Exasperated by this interruption, he stormed out, slamming the door behind him and shouting, "You can all go to the devil!"

He was an odd fellow, abrupt, repulsive and attractive at the same time. I felt tied to him from that day when I heard him speak so bravely and lucidly, for despite his eccentricity he was brave. People told strange stories about Soleràs; a kind of legend had grown up around him in our

brigade. The paradoxes he so enjoyed were meant to disturb. Just as that day he'd been the firmest supporter of an attack on the anarchists ("An army that leaves those in the rear feeling unprotected can't possibly win," he'd said), on other occasions he'd ^{been} ~~let~~ the most astonishing apologies for anarchism, "the only serious attempt to change the world into that huge mess we all long for." According to his whims, he'd defend the most incompatible ideas, so that many thought he talked gibberish, when in reality he ^{was} ~~is~~ the most intelligent person I've ever known.

He paid no attention to me. It's not ^{that} ~~he~~ avoided me. It was worse; he didn't even notice my existence. One day I mentioned that meeting and told him I agreed with what he'd said. I said I suspected that there were fascist agents among the agitators who manipulated the death squads in Barcelona. For me, they were more than vague suspicions since I knew Lamonedà, about whom I'll go into more detail another day. Soleràs cut me off. "You're just stating the obvious. It's not worth talking if all you can say is what any fool knows."

My attempts to confide about my private life met with no more success. He interrupted me, "We all have aunts who long to see us desert to the other side."

One day he hurled this phrase at me--a phrase he'd repeat on various occasions, "Every nephew has the aunt he deserves."

Our two aunts, his and mine, had almost nothing in common. He felt a genuine tenderness toward his, however much he tried to disguise it with his scornful tone. Mine, on the other hand, has always repelled me. Despite his rebuffs, I was very fond of Soleràs. His cynicism didn't intimidate me. I guessed that he was a loner full of painful, secret riches. Was he a Catholic? ^{At most} ~~In any case~~ he was cynically Catholic. In his mouth, religious verities took on the most surprising forms, and often the most

infuriating ones.

When, due to his unusual conduct in a battle that's beside the point right now, they stripped him of his rank of second lieutenant, I went to assure him of my undying friendship.

X I went in all my innocence, which was still considerable at the time. I thought he might need me at that moment, when they'd demoted him (Lluís still hadn't joined our brigade). I thought a few drops of balm on the burning wound his demotion must have caused would ~~always~~ be welcome. Now, so many years later, it seems odd to think how much importance we attributed to the loss of a second lieutenant's stripes (he was a second lieutenant, though his duties were those of a lieutenant) replaced by those of a sergeant--the next lowest rank--but the fact is that in the course of a few months of war we'd so absorbed the military spirit that a demotion seemed an almost unbearable disgrace. After his demotion, some of the officers turned away when they saw him.

I found him in the ~~service corps's storeroom~~ ^{commissary} surrounded by cans of condensed milk and sacks of rice and chickpeas. Seated on one of the sacks, he was absorbed in a book he was reading.

"Sit down," he curtly said. "I was just thinking of you, since you're a second lieutenant in the medical corps. I want you to tell me exactly what the symptoms of gonorrhea are."

His eternal wisecracks . . . but that day I wasn't expecting them and I almost burst out crying. Because I've always been a crybaby.

"Damn, don't take it so hard. I'm not asking for myself. It's a certain fellow named Casanova. Maybe you've heard of him. Casanova, a Venetian by trade. I find his memoirs very troubling. If we're to believe him, he recovered from his symptoms as easily as he got them. Is that possible?"

"In the eighteenth century, only by a miracle."

"A miracle! What a great way to get over gonorrhea! But Casanova was a follower of Voltaire. We'll have to discard that hypothesis."

"I didn't come here to talk about Casanova."

"Did you come to bother me with political chatter?"

At that time there were still a lot of conversations about politics in our brigade. We talked about it so much that by the time Lluís arrived, we were thoroughly sick of it. We ended up fighting the war as best we could (since we were there) and not worrying about anything else. Soleràs had been the first to tire of political blather. He often made fun of the endless speeches the radio and newspapers spewed.

"Look here," he said, pointing to the sacks of chickpeas. "This is how I heroically struggle against fascism--that is, against the bad guys. We shout 'Death to the fascists!' and they shout 'Death to the Reds.' We all mean the same thing, 'Death to the bad guys!' Everyone's against the bad guys. Everyone, always and everywhere, has been in favor of the good guys. God Almighty, how monotonous! Isn't there anyone with a little imagination on this planet? But the worst thing about wars is that they're later turned into novels. About this one (which I assure you is as shitty a war as any), they're going to write some especially idiotic novels, trashy sentimental pornography. They're going to have wonderfully courageous heroes, terrifically stacked, angelic heroines. Not you, Cruells; you won't afflict us with one of these weighty tomes. But those foreigners . . . It's a pity you don't believe I'm blessed with the gift of prophesy, because I assure you that those foreigners are going to turn this whole phenomenal mess into some terrific stories about bullfighters and gypsies."

"Bullfighters? I've never heard, as far as I can remember . . ."

"Yes, Cruells, I know. No one's ever seen a bullfighter in the army, and even less a gypsy, but foreigners can smell a good business deal.

Business is businessss, they say, and time is money. And for a novel about Spain to sell, it's absolutely necessary for the hero to be a bullfighter and the heroine a gypsy. In the third chapter, you'll find them fornicating in a tropical jungle full of wild bulls. Everything else is a waste of time, and time is money. Foreigners are cretins. I can speak from experience, because I've traveled. Things are never going to go right as long as there are so many foreigners."

"So now you've got it in for foreigners?"

"What makes me maddest," he growled in his bass voice, "is to think I'm a foreigner too. It's the first thing you notice when you travel. The first time (I was in the former kingdom of Saxony) that a public official treated me as a foreigner, I was about to haul off and punch him as though he'd insulted me. 'Me, a foreigner?' I shouted. 'Never! You're the foreigner!' Because we all think the others are foreigners. We're all foreigners! It's revolting! You have the illusion that only other people are foreigners, when you yourself are the most hopelessly foreign of all."

"Poor Soleràs," I said, "basically what you say is true. The most hopelessly foreign . . . but what do you gain by always trying to get to the bottom of things?"

"All I gain is shit," he angrily shot back. "If I could be an idiot like everyone else! Take a glance at that newspaper lying on those sacks of chickpeas, look at that enormous front-page headline: 'Workers, arise!' It's a speech our brilliant comrade Llibert Milmany broadcast on the radio. He's chief of war propaganda--but excuse me. I just realized you don't know who he is."

It was true. I'd barely heard of Lluís's brother-in-law--after all, I still hadn't met Lluís--even though he'd been a regular dynamo of activity in the area of propaganda ever since a few weeks after the war began. I'd

been at the front since the beginning, when Llibert Milmany was still unknown, and at the front no one spoke of him or any of the other characters who appeared and disappeared in a saraband we couldn't make head or tail of. Soleràs, on the other hand, knew him very well.

"A brilliant comrade! He's our age and strong as an ox, but he's indispensable in the rear. 'Workers, arise!' he says, seated in his huge office in Barcelona. When you entered, I was struggling with a guilty conscience. I'm sure you noticed that I was sitting on a sack of chickpeas reading Casanova's memoirs, and nonetheless this newspaper says it loud and clear: 'Workers, arise!' Could I remain seated on those chickpeas? Should I have arisen, as our brilliant comrade urged me to do? As far as I can make out, 'arise' means 'stand up.' But am I a worker? A terrible doubt! In reality, I'm nothing more than an aspiring notary. I should write the illustrious Llibert an anonymous letter (anonymous because he knows me too well), suggesting that he vary his speeches a little. In the next one, for example, he could say, 'Notaries, arise!' or 'Pharmacists, arise!' Good Lord, a little variety . . ."

After that encounter, we didn't see each other for several weeks. His job was transporting food from the rear in his van, and sometimes he'd be away from our brigade for days on end. One evening, he showed up unexpectedly at the battalion's first-aid station where I was serving. He'd come, he said, all the way to that village, far from the ~~service corps~~ ^{commissary}, to have a long chat with me. After supper, I took him down to the basement where I slept. I brought another straw mattress down for him.

"If I told you that always, right from my tenderest infancy,"--it was with these words that, as soon as we were lying on our mattresses, he began a monologue that would last for hours--"I've perceived the universe as an ocean of womanliness . . . Ah, those who can dive deep into its

warm and inebriating waters! But I'm like a kind of Tantalus stranded on the beach. The ocean's right there, but I can't dive in! You can pretend you don't head for it because you're too virtuous. I can't use that excuse. I've tried everything, but women won't let me! On the other hand, my case is especially complex, because I'm wildly Catholic! Some people don't believe in anything, not even in Black Masses. They're the ones who preside at them, of course, but they know not what they do. Extremely eminent gentlemen, ~~you know~~ ^{you know}: managers of big corporations, professors of economics, distinguished pedants. They haven't a clue that, without realizing it, they worship the Anti-Eternal Father."

"The Anti-Eternal Father?"

"Yes, the Anti-Eternal Father. That's what I call him, and if you think it over for a minute, you'll see that it's most appropriate. I'm deeply convinced that it's his true name, and if no one knows it, that's because he likes to travel incognito. He likes to take on the dullest forms in his incarnations, which are far more frequent than you think. He likes to melt into the grayest crowds in the streets and get people to worship him without realizing what they're doing. He likes equivocation, ambiguity, ~~hoaxes~~ ^{disguises}. He likes luxury, not expensive luxury but blatant luxury--the kind you find in dens of iniquity anyone can afford, because he's also mindful of the poor. He never forgets those modest employees who can only cut loose on weekends. Barcelona summers are long. The nights are short but hot and oppressive. Unforgettable muggy Barcelona nights! From time to time I'd escape from Godella, where my aunt and I always spent the summer, saying the economics professor wanted to see me. I'd plunge into that world I knew so well and that attracted me so much. I knew it mostly in winter, but in summer it seemed to open like one of those fruits that burst in the heat, showing their sumptuously ripe and overripe

insides. Tormented by heat and insomnia, some people wander through those narrow streets like butterflies going from flower to flower till they find one that has some kind of strange attraction for them--much stronger than the others, though they couldn't tell you why. Apparently ^{shen} it's the same, planted in a doorway or on a street corner like a sentinel doing his duty. ^{She} It has nothing special, nothing the others don't have, but one feels an irresistible impulse to kneel before ^{her} it. The ^{idiots} have no idea what they're doing. So many are idolaters without knowing it! But the ancients understood the Anti-Eternal's fascination: fascinatio fugacitatis. The ⁱ irresistible fascination of what's fleeting, of what won't last longer than one short, muggy night! O idolatry of idolatries! To kneel before what will be destroyed by sickness, age, and death. To kiss it worshipfully! To renounce Eternity and enslave oneself to Time! But at least I'm not the manager of a big corporation, nor do I pontificate behind a lectern like a professor of economics, and afterward--always afterward!--I'd leave, as the light of dawn was breaking over the port, to prostrate myself in some forgotten church, dark and deserted, my eyes fixed on the light of the holy altar as I surrendered to sweet repentance. Yes, sweet it is to tell that forgotten and crucified God, 'Lord, it was You who taught me this trick, this marvelous trick, the publican's prayer.'"

In the dark, his precentor's voice vibrated like the lowest notes on an organ. It became more and more emphatic, and it was hard to tell the difference between emotion and mockery.

"Woman is an Ocean, and man is the Sahara. These two opposed immensities, water and thirst, exist side by side and will never mingle. If they mingled, the most glorious of continents would be born, but it's impossible. In the heart of the Sahara, where the sun beats down most cruelly, lives a variety of cactus that can reach considerable heights. An

occasional Tuareg caravan has glimpsed, from a distance, the only example of this species (since it's a species with a single specimen). Its long, vertical shadow stretches across the sands all the way to the horizon. It's really the shadow, not the cactus, that the Tuaregs have glimpsed. Well, besides being a single specimen, this cactus has another peculiarity: it lives a thousand years, flowers for a second, and then dies. You know, the Sahara is remarkable in more than one respect."

"I never heard of this cactus."

X "No? It's extraordinary. The moment finally arrives when it's supposed to flower. 'Bah,' it says. 'What's the use?' And it prefers to expire without experiencing that second of glory. That second it had spent a thousand years ~~getting~~ ^{preparing} preparing for! 'Flower? What for?' it says when the moment comes. Yes; when the time comes it says 'Bah!' and expires without deigning to flower. You've really never heard of it? That's astonishing! A man of scant education, as Captain Picó would say. Because it's a very well known cactus: the cactus solerassus. You've really never heard of it? What about insects? Don't tell me you've never heard of insects either!"

~~"What insects?"~~

"What insects? All of them! All insects! Insects; it doesn't matter which! It's funny how insects begin their lives in decrepitude, the opposite of us. Which system is better? Some of them pathetically drag themselves along for years, waiting for an instant of youth, of nuptial flight. Basically, it's the same story as the cactus solerassus. As though everything were a preparation for that nuptial flight, for glory, but then they wouldn't let us taste more than a single drop, a single instant! And for this single drop, this single instant, for this flash of uncertain glory . . . Bah, you get lost in a ridiculous labyrinth, an enormous mess! For

example: when animal life hadn't gone much beyond the insect stage (since we're talking about insects), plant life had already achieved its most spectacular flowering: the most monstrous and stunning orchids had burst into bloom in the hearts of the thickest, hottest jungles when our grandfather, the earthworm, was still crawling along eyelessly. At the time you would have thought plants were destined to achieve the highest glory. Now we know this wasn't so. God chose to descend from the earthworm rather than the orchid. You have to admit you could go crazy trying to make head or tail of it."

It was pointless for me to try to interrupt his soliloquy. He was carried away by his own rhetoric; his precentor's voice became more and more emphatic. I knew he was gesticulating because the lit end of his cigarette traced strange arabesques in the darkness of that basement room. He jumped from one subject to another, and I think he ended up forgetting I was there.

X "The least we can say is that everything but nothingness is inexplicable. It's remarkable how few people realize that by an infallible algebraic equation, not to believe in anything equals believing in nothingness. If nothing existed, there would be no problem. Everything would be plain as day. Nothingness is the only thing that's logical, rational, free of mystery, perfectly simple and understandable. But nothingness is the only thing that doesn't exist--by definition--and all existence is mystery. Which is the same as saying that thinking is a waste of time since you never can get anywhere, or that there's nothing, or that if there's something, it's an inconceivable mystery. But then again, that's not what we were talking about. Let's not change the subject. I was saying it's women, not me, who don't want to. Because chastity isn't my strong point, I can assure you. Since you're a priest or will be, you're

obliged to listen to my confessions on this subject, which I imagine accounts for ninety-nine percent of all confessions. So here's the essential point: they won't let you, with honorable exceptions of course, but who ever cared about exceptions? Exceptions . . . the ones who'll let you . . . as soon as they let me, I don't feel like doing anything . . . One has to recognize that there's a mystery here: mysteries all over the place! We only truly feel like it with the ones who won't let us. Let atheists explain that one; fucking atheists! They dazzle us with progress! They go to America and start off as newspaper boys. They make huge fortunes and then come back and tell us how they made them, as though we cared. It's all the fault of progress, since in earlier times people who went to America didn't come back and make nuisances of themselves. I, as I sit here before you, have also been a newspaper boy. I sold an unsaleable paper called Blast. But not in America, where I certainly would have made a fortune, but in Barcelona, right on the Ramblas. It's amazing how these characters who return from America aren't ashamed of their fortunes. They'll tell you all about them without blushing, unable to grasp the profundity of a phrase my aunt uttered. They'd introduced her to a very elegant and distinguished gentleman. 'A very well-bred man,' she said afterward. 'They say he had to make his own fortune, that he worked his way up, but I'm sure that's a slander.' Perhaps that gentleman had started off selling newspapers on the streets of New York. Over there, it's quite the done thing, it's in good taste, it's how all millionaires started off. They'd be ashamed of having sold them on the streets of Barcelona, but in New York it's high-class. Shame is another mystery I'd like those brilliant atheists to explain. Of all the things I've done, the one I'm most ashamed of is answering an ad in La Vanguardia offering a 'confidential leaflet' on how build up my muscles in fifteen days. For fifteen pessetes: a pesseta a

day. As you see me here before you, I was capable of spending fifteen pessetes to learn the secrets of body building. Since I'm confessing, I might as well tell you everything at once. I even had a 'private consultation' with Madame Zoraida, 'expert in the psychology of amorous conquests.' Naturally, I still couldn't make a single conquest: not even Madame Zoraida, despite the fact that she was a gypsy of the most shameless sort. You don't believe me? Why, I even bought a tube of hair-growing lotion, and not a small tube but the giant-sized one. How happy I'd be if the razor made a little noise when I shave . . . One new hair sprouted; only one, though it was a very long one."

He sighed, as though burdened by a painful memory, and then resumed his monologue, which now had to do with geology. At the time I couldn't guess what geology had to do with Soleràs.

"I even lowered myself to studying geology. I slogged through volume after volume without understanding a thing. Because women love geology, didn't you know? All in vain! The only thing that sank in was that only by some extraordinary accident would we ever be fossils. You see, they won't give us even that consolation! Because previously, it had comforted me to think someday I'd be a fossilized skeleton in a glass case in a museum, labeled Homo solerassus antiquus, scaring kids on school trips. Farewell, sweet dreams of innocence lost! I had to plow through a whopping big tome to lose my illusions on that score. Only by an amazing fluke will I ever be a fossil. I can say, therefore, that my works and days have been wasted. The hair-growing lotion, Madame Zoraida's psychology course, my geological studies and everything else I've done has been a waste. And nonetheless, who is it ^{that} ~~who~~ makes our hair grow? We ourselves, of course, we ourselves, but not with our conscious wills--since then it would be very simple--but with another kind of will of which we have no

awareness, that's buried deep inside us. It's this other will, whose existence we don't even suspect, that makes our hair and nails grow, that shapes our faces and bodies. Everyone has the face he wants, but-- silence!--no one's aware of this other will. Silence, silence! Let's not muddy the waters! I could tell you so many things . . . because I've pondered these matters deeply. All my life! And that would lead me to talk about my childhood and my aunt, so different from yours. For yours, life is as logical as a bank account. How many good deeds have you deposited? How much have you withdrawn? What's the balance? That's all. For mine, on the contrary, everything's mysterious, dark, strange. Her natural milieu is the supernatural."

"Saint Philomena . . ." I ventured.

"Leave Saint Philomena alone," he cut me off sharply. "More or less celestial visions aren't surprising. I can tell you something better, because tonight I want to tell you everything. When will we have a more fitting occasion? You won't breathe a word to anyone in the brigade, because as a priest, you have to keep secret what you hear in confession. Remember: I haven't told anyone you're a priest. Some people in this brigade are so boorish, so practical, so clever . . ."

"I'm not a priest."

"That doesn't matter. You will be, and you already look like one. Just seeing the way you look would give anyone a tremendous urge to confess, to confess everything, even his darkest, heaviest, unhappiest secrets. As though our shame rose from our stomachs to our throats, turning thick and sweet as honey. Yes, Cruells, you'll have to listen to my stories because tonight I'm not sleepy and I'm in the mood to talk till dawn, as you can see. They're just stories, of course, but the kind that mark you for life. I lived in a rarified atmosphere from my tenderest infancy till the

beginning of the war. For many long years, interminable years--and despite everything, I wouldn't trade aunts with you for anything on earth. Laws, according to Papinian, exist to give each man ^{his due.} ~~what is rightly his~~. Then let each man stick ^{to} ~~with~~ his own aunt. Suum cuique tribuere."

"That citation isn't from Papinian. It's from Ulpian."

"Well, let's not argue about trifles. There are so many unexplained phenomena . . ."

From his tone of voice, I gathered that he was feeling unsure of himself and uneasy but trying to hide it with his wild talk. He fell silent for a long while after saying "There are so many unexplained phenomena," a phrase that disappointed me in its ~~obvious~~ banality. His cigarette had gone out, and he was so still that I thought he'd fallen asleep.

"There are so many unexplained phenomena," his deep voice repeated after that silence. "Do you think early Christianity was much more respectable than spiritualism? I mean to the profane; don't get mad. I mean to those who don't give a damn, who have always been and always will be the majority. Please: hear me out before you get mad. You, precisely you, are one of the rare persons who could understand me, since you told me you used to sleepwalk. Everyone has to put up with his aunt, and as far as mine's concerned . . ."

When I was twelve, shortly after ~~my~~ Aunt Llúcia had given me that telescope as a reward for my good grades, I had in fact sleepwalked, and Soleràs was the only one in our brigade who knew about it. I'd found myself strolling along the edge of our roof in Sarrià, as though I were gazing through my telescope, but my eyes were shut. If my aunt hadn't told me about it, I never would have known, since once you wake up you don't remember a thing. At the time when I had that conversation with Soleràs, I hadn't sleepwalked again, so that first occasion, long ago, was

X the only one. Shortly thereafter, when Lluís had just joined our brigade, I sleepwalked for a second time. The soldiers on guard duty found me wandering through the streets of Olivet de la Virgen, also acting as if I were looking through a ^{my} telescope, but that's beside the point.

We had this conversation around the end of November. While Soleràs was talking about sleepwalking, rain began beating against the skylight, which didn't shut right. A fine spray entered, along with gusts of cold wind. He lit his cigarette again, and for an instant I glimpsed his face. It took me aback, as though I'd seen a ghost. He seemed skinnier than ever and had an expression as if he were in the middle of a migraine attack. With the cigarette in his lips and a match in his hand, he wiped his forehead with his left hand and stared at me out of his nearsighted eyes, which expressed something like an attempt to hide shameful suffering. After disappearing into the darkness, he returned to his soliloquy.

"In her burrow without electricity, as far from light and air as a pharaoh at the bottom of his pyramid, my aunt (who's extremely rich, Cruells) has invented a secret world for her private use. On the other hand, that's the only truly enviable advantage the rich have, this chance to invent private worlds, to do whatever they feel like doing without worrying about what people will say. On certain nights, I heard a sort of creaking sound. I'd always heard it from time to time, as far back as I can remember. It was a faint creaking unlike any other, as though it were coming from inside the furniture. My bedroom is at the opposite end of the apartment from hers and looks out on the garden behind a convent. For her bedroom my aunt had chosen the smallest, most inner room. Since it's an apartment from the last century (she's never wanted to move), it has a number of windowless rooms, and she'd chosen one of these. The only opening is the door, which leads to the entrance hall. One night

when I was going on thirteen, I heard louder creaks than usual. They came from the sitting room, which is next to my bedroom. It was as though someone were sawing through the mahogany console table or were drumming on it with his fingers. These odd sounds would sometimes get louder till they sounded like a horse galloping in the distance or two people batting a rubber ball back and forth. Dying of curiosity, I got out of bed. A ray of moonlight filtered through the shutters, was reflected in the mirror on the console table, and bounced back onto an oil painting of my grandfather. A heavy scent of orange flowers wafted up from the nuns' garden, because it was a June night. I was barefoot. The sounds abruptly stopped as soon as I entered the sitting room. A short while later I heard them again, but fainter and coming not from the sitting room but from the hallway that led to the front door. I tried to follow them, but the sounds grew fainter, as though they were eluding me. As I followed, I found myself in my aunt's bedroom. Are you listening?"

"Yes."

"It's crucial that I explain all this to you, Cruells. Absolutely crucial! The bedroom was stuffy, since my aunt always sleeps with the door closed. Normally my footsteps, even though I was barefoot, would have woken her up since she has an extremely keen sense of hearing, not to mention the noise I made opening the door. Normally, also, the darkness would have been pitch-black, yet despite everything I perceived a vague glow, something bluish and indefinite coming from I don't know where, just enough for me to glimpse her. Her eyes were wide-open and she was smiling. Spit trickled from one side of her mouth onto the pillow. Motionless and smiling, she couldn't see me. She was asleep, but nonetheless her eyes were wide-open. The mahogany night table beside her bed was half suspended in the air. Only one of its three legs touched the

floor, and it balanced delicately, as though about to begin dancing a very slow waltz. All this, which has taken so long to recount, lasted a second. As soon as I walked in, the table brusquely returned to earth, the bluish light vanished, the noises stopped. Are you listening?"

"Yes," I repeated.

"The next day I tried to talk to her about it, concealing the fact that I'd entered her bedroom. All I mentioned were those strange noises, those vague glimmers. She listened to me with a grimace of incredulous contempt, and after awhile she touched her forehead. 'That's all nonsense,' she said, 'spiritualist mumbo jumbo. You'd be better off reading Bossuet's complete works.'"

"Why Bossuet's?"

"It was obvious that my aunt hadn't heard a thing. It was obvious, and yet she possesses a very keen sense of hearing (as well I know, since I had a hell of a time sneaking out at night, and by the time I was thirteen I'd already started sneaking out). After ten at night it was just the two of us in our apartment, as that was when the maid--an old lady who'd served many years in a convent before we hired her--went up to sleep in the garret, where she had a much bigger and more comfortable bedroom than my aunt's. I should tell you the building is one of my aunt's many properties, certainly the oldest. We live in the smallest apartment, but the garrets are enormous. So after ten no one else was around, and the trances--don't laugh; that's what they were--occurred between midnight and four in the morning. Thus I made a great discovery: at that time my aunt slept much more deeply. I took advantage of it in my nocturnal escapades. I could walk down the hallway and open and shut the front door, which is a few steps from her bedroom, without her noticing. She was in a trance."

"Do you really expect me to believe . . ."

"Yes. I expect you to believe it because it's the only possible explanation. You've sleepwalked, so you know from experience that afterward you don't remember. On certain nights, my aunt falls into a trance in her sleep and has no idea what's occurred. Let's say, simplifying things, that she's a medium without knowing it. You wouldn't know you were a sleepwalker if others hadn't told you. Need I remind you that others have written prose without knowing it? How many things we do without knowing we've done them! On the other hand, my aunt's case isn't as rare as you imagine. Many others of her sort have been studied. They're more the rule than the exception. Most mediums aren't aware of what they are. If my aunt, so devout, so loyal to the Fathers of the Oratory, had any inkling, she'd be appalled. Once when we were chatting after lunch, I astutely brought the conversation around to certain parapsychological experiments that had caused quite a stir and at which Einstein and Madame Curie had been present. She interrupted me, 'Never talk to me about these things, I beg you. They make me feel like throwing up.' All I can say is that since then, she's never been able to hear Einstein's name without ~~feeling a wrench in her~~ ^{it turning her} stomach. Well, it's precisely these significant nauseas that put us on the right track. Doesn't her profound uneasiness at the thought of parapsychological phenomena come from the fact that she herself suffers from them? Nothing disgusts us as much as what's hidden deep inside us. Now, Cruells, you can understand who I am: a hereditary freak, who lived till he was over twenty up to his neck in air as dense as the water in a stagnant pond. I'm nothing more than the hysterical nephew of a semiepileptic aunt, the only surviving male heir ⁱⁿ to a family of nuts. The only surviving male, pay close attention, raised and pampered by a millionaire, visionary spinster

aunt. I horrify myself, Cruells. At night, when I'm alone at the end of that big storeroom (because I sleep there), I get chills as though someone were blowing on my face in the dark. The hair stands up along my back like on a dog howling at . . . howling at what? Dogs know; we don't. I suppose it's pointless telling you that spiritualists are generally nice, straightforward people without fancy airs, happy when under the innocent illusion that they're chatting with their beloved deceased aunts. There's no truth in what they believe. The poor stiff never sticks their noses in our business. If it were them, everything would be simple, but it's not them. It's something much more disturbing: ourselves. It's a question of our 'other will,' of that 'other' everyone unwittingly carries around inside him. It's this 'other' who acts at the very moment of conception, who organizes matter into hands, eyes, and feet. It's ^{this 'other'} ~~he~~ who at puberty suddenly makes all that surprising hair sprout. And there's plenty to be surprised at! We're so surprised at mediumistic phenomena that we refuse to believe in them, and yet we're not a bit surprised at the way our nails and beards grow, though one thing is as inexplicable as the other. That trickle from my aunt's mouth was probably ectoplasmic, yes, but in the final analysis, so are our nails and hair. So is everything! Moreover, there's a parapsychological phenomenon within everyone's reach: dreams. In our dreams we see things and faces, we hear sounds and voices. All this we create ourselves, not with our conscious will but with the other. How often we've longed to control our dreams! Impossible. Our dreams would be so wonderful if we could choose them! For example, we could dream of sensational broads with terrific bodies and eyes full of the most reprehensible and tenderest desires. And yet the ones I dream about are hideous. If I told you how many times I've dreamed of that hag Madame Zoraida! If we could exercise our 'other will' as we do our conscious will,

we could achieve something even better than choosing our dreams. We could have faces like gods, thick beards, muscles like stevedores, chests like horses. Impossible, impossible, impossible! We have no power over our 'other will.' It's blind and groping; it can lose its way. Just as during gestation it can organize matter into a hand or foot, a liver or spleen, at another moment it can organize it into a monstrous cancer."

"You've lost me," I muttered.

"I've lost myself too," he said. "I can't understand it either. It all makes my head spin. Everyone has the face he wants, but the one he wants with his other will. And that's the worst part of it ~~all~~², since it turns out that everyone has the face he deserves, the one he himself creates. Yes, that's the worst part, because my face . . . Let's not discuss it, please. It grieves me to think about it. My face appalls me. And this automatism that controls us, this unconscious will, this double abyss in which we're trapped . . . I say double because it all occurs between two mysteries, the beginning and the end, the obscene and the macabre, two bottomless pits. Everything, everything comes down to this: ectoplasmic phenomena and dreams alike. It's not by accident that spiritualists think they see messages from the dead in that abyss, whose funereal air often brings them to mind. It's just that they've never been able to explain the other aspect. They're upset that their beloved disembodied aunts so often send such silly messages from the great beyond."

"Always the same," I muttered wearily. I couldn't follow what he was saying, and on the other hand I was exhausted and blasts of rainy wind from the skylight kept hitting me in the face.

"Yes, always the same." Soleràs tried to light his cigarette again, but the gusts of damp wind kept blowing out his matches. "And on the other hand, the Freudians, the goddamned Freudians, see only the obscene side.

They're like those giants in processions, who look out at everything through the fly. The macabre escapes them. Everyone sees only one side of the subject, but it has two! It's a double abyss! We're up to our eyes in mud in this double abyss. But despite everything, our eyes are free, just free enough to perceive another abyss above . . ."

He kept on unsuccessfully trying to light his cigarette. The gusts of wind blew out the matches. His voice grew more and more solemn in the darkness.

"At that time, I'd begun getting drunk as a lord. I'd wait till my aunt's trances began and then tiptoe out, holding my shoes. Between midnight and four in the morning, I'd live my other life in dives that stank of cane liquor and piss, in the heart of the Barri Xino. The customers got sozzled on cane liquor and, for convenience's sake, pissed in the corners. Since then it's been rumored that the city government set up those dives for the tourist trade, but that's a dirty lie. I can swear that in my time I didn't see a single tourist. I came home, dead drunk, when the sun began to rise. One Monday I got into bed even more sloshed than usual. The bed swayed like a boat and made me feel like throwing up. The clock in the sitting room was striking four when a phosphorescent glow, bluish-green and no bigger than an apple, formed almost at the height of the ceiling. It hopped around, staying at the same height, till it stopped right above me. Then it took on a viscous consistency, or perhaps one like dough. An eye formed in it and looked down at me. I was lying on my back, trying to ride out those waves of drunken nausea, and there was that single eye, staring down at me from the ceiling. The other eye never opened. I could barely make it out in that whitish phosphorescent mass. I could also vaguely make out the features on a face, very blurry at first but then easily recognizable. It was mine. Yes, it was a face strangely

similar to mine. And I heard my voice, a scratchy voice like on an old-fashioned Victrola, or perhaps more exactly like the voice of someone who's lost his vocal cords and is making a supreme effort to speak. That voice said: Eppur si muove."

Though I was half asleep, I couldn't help laughing at such an unexpected turn.

"Don't laugh," Soleràs said. "It said eppur si muove. As sure as I'm here talking to you! And as that face with its single eye began to melt away like wax, I still heard that voice, scratchier than ever, saying 'millions and millions and millions of . . .'"

"Millions of what?"

X "I wouldn't dare to repeat it in front of you, ~~poor~~ ^I Cruells, but that doesn't matter. You can imagine what it was. At that moment nausea overwhelmed me and I puked up all the cane liquor I'd imbibed at Tanguet's dive--that was her name, or at least what they called her, one of the most battle-hardened whores from Arc del Teatre Street, you know, overripe like a fig they forgot to harvest and that at the very end of autumn falls under its own weight and bursts. I was fascinated precisely by the smell of rotting autumn leaves that emanated from her. That's why I frequented her dive, which in any case I think I've described to you before. Because one dreams of the most virginal girls, those whose gaze is most brazenly innocent and whose hair smells of thyme from the world's first morning, shy and elusive as mountain hares . . . yes, Cruells, when one's head is full of hopeless dreams, of longings one can't satisfy, one finds a deep peace in the den of a really ripe, decadent, ~~broken-down~~ ^{worn-out} whore."

X He sighed, flung his empty matchbox against the panes on the skylight, and after a pause continued, "Now you see me keeping track of

all the chickpeas you guzzle, but I was born for something better. Who, on his deathbed, couldn't say with Maine de Biran: 'J'étais né pour quelque chose de mieux'? But what can we do? We were all born to conquer the universe, but we don't conquer shit! The universe is beautiful but it won't let us, like those virginal girls whose gaze is so bright, so brazen, so shy, so wild. It's all the same story. I've tried everything: taming ^{these} wild angels, poring over geology, forcing my way into the viscous abyss of parapsychology and Freudianism, ^{freeing} ~~redeeming~~ slaves. How glorious it would be to ^{free} ~~redeem~~ them! But they won't let me. The working class won't let me, probably for the same dark and therefore compelling reasons that the universe, ectoplasms, angelic peasant girls, and geology won't let me. Our impotent voracity as we stare at that ocean of womanhood, stranded on the beach like Tantalus, as we contemplate the entire universe--so breathtakingly beautiful! Look at it one late-autumn evening and you'll see what I mean. Why is it so beautiful if we never can possess it? Why this immense hunger and this immense universe, if they weren't made for each other? There comes a time when a man says, 'Cursed hunger! You want more than the universe. The entire universe wouldn't appease you! You'd have to devour God Himself!'"

I was horrified, thinking I'd heard an enormous blasphemy. His precentor's voice had taken on a kind of tremulous flight, not upward but downward, growing more and more solemn like a black bird in a descending spiral. You'd have said the basement walls vibrated with that resonant voice. And I broke out in a cold sweat at what I took as an atrocious blasphemy.

"There comes a time when a man says, 'It's God I want to devour!' And God lets him."

I suddenly understood what he was saying, and curled up on my

mattress, I started weeping softly because I couldn't help myself; because I'd understood him and the tears streamed helplessly down my face.

X "Don't take it like that, don't be an idiot," he said. "If God didn't let himself be eaten, humanity would have starved to death long ago! But maybe we should go to sleep. We've talked enough nonsense for one night."

II

I could hardly recognize Barcelona in December 1937.

I hadn't been back in a year and a half--ever since I'd set out for the front. Nothing was left of that excitement at the beginning, of that July filled with vociferous multitudes brandishing rifles amid smoke from burning buildings. Instead, Barcelona's indifferent silence was now its most striking feature.

A smell of rot pervaded the city beneath its silence, its calm, its grimness, its cold. Gone from the streets were those women with close-cropped hair, armed and dressed like men, who had formed part of my last vision of Barcelona. Now there was hardly anything but women in the streets, yet they bore no resemblance to those "militiawomen" from the first few months. On the contrary, long hair dyed brilliant colors was all the rage: platinum blondes and bright redheads who left a trail of heavy perfume. It made me dizzy to see so many of them. A surfeit of liberty, child of a year and a half of revolution and chaos, had left a sort of shadow of excited sadness in those blue, green, brown, and hazel eyes.

X "Here we have it," I thought. "The war has truly separated that ocean and that Sahara Soleràs ^{was blathering on} ~~used to blather on~~ about: men at the front, women in the rear"--and I suddenly found myself submerged in the ocean.

What the devil was I doing in Barcelona in December 1937? It's a bit complicated to explain. For the moment I wandered through the streets feeling hopelessly foreign in that city, which nonetheless was my own. Much more foreign than in July 1936: the fever had abated, replaced by something repulsive in its hypocrisy and incomprehensibility, something ironic, disillusioned. Barcelona, once drunk on strange shouts, was now beaten down, resigned, and cynical.

The walls of buildings disappeared beneath a phenomenal number of posters. The exaltation of 1936, dead and forgotten, struggled to survive in those posters, read by no one but me. For me they were new. When I'd left the city a year and a half before, those astonishing posters had not yet sprouted and bloomed. Crowds with disenchanted faces dragged themselves like a tired, muddy stream past those garish posters celebrating the revolution, the proletariat, the "war against ~~f~~ascism." People plodded by without looking at them. In one, a foot in a Catalan rope-soled sandal crushed a swastika; in others one saw supposedly republican soldiers whom I never would have recognized as such in their arrogant poses and impeccable uniforms. There was also that famous one we'd heard so much about that urged--whom? the women in the rear?--to "build tanks, tanks, tanks!" I knew that flood of multicolored, strident posters was the handiwork of Llibert Milmany, whom I hadn't met. I knew it from those letters I'd read on the sly, but I would have found out anyway in Barcelona because everyone spoke of "Comrade Llibert" as a very shrewd and influential fellow. Just at the time of my flying visit, Llibert was abandoning Solidaridad Obrera, which was starting to sink, and boarding another vessel that was steaming full speed ahead or appeared to be. I wouldn't meet him until the following spring. Meanwhile, his fame was broadcast far and wide, and whenever people talked about him they pointed to those posters slapped up on every wall in town. "They're all his doing, every last one of them."

And not long before, I'd felt as tired and disillusioned as that gray, sullen multitude. Soleràs's disappearance, quickly followed by Lluís's, had made me suddenly feel utterly alone in that brigade, my God, so alone!

Soleràs had vanished around the end of October. No one knew a thing about him, as though the earth had swallowed him up. Lluís wasn't

the same after that. He was in a foul mood: something we attributed to the disappearance of his lifelong friend. And in one of our last engagements, which were rather bloody, he too had disappeared. Some thought he was dead; others said he'd been taken prisoner. As far as Soleràs was concerned, at first we thought he'd gone over to our rivals, the Flatfoot Brigade; but we learned that the flatfeet knew no more than we did about him.

Without Lluís and Soleràs, our brigade seemed meaningless to me. By now we knew, with utter certainty and in considerable detail, many of the horrors that had occurred in the rear while we were at the front. The church-burning and priest-killing had stopped months before, but they'd left a nasty memory that only the reestablishment of public worship would have erased. Months went by, and we began to lose this hope, which had sustained us in the worst moments of anarchist violence--the hope that the disorder was temporary, that the autonomous government would reassert its authority and give the war the only meaning that would be valid for one and all: the defense of what united us, of what could have united us despite our differences--our imperiled homeland. Months went by, and the strange shouts were succeeded by other strange shouts. I felt bewildered, unable to grasp what was occurring, more and more exhausted and discouraged. So much sacrifice, so much blood, so much effort, for what? What were we defending? Why wasn't the Catholic Church, to which most Catalans belonged, allowed to worship freely? Sometimes I felt guilty or at least uncertain about fighting for the republicans. This feeling had grown stronger since I'd found myself so alone, without Lluís or Soleràs.

Without them, I'd sunk into a depression that nothing could alleviate. Moreover, our battles had gone from bad to worse, and routs were increasingly frequent. Our infantry had to attack enemy trenches without

tanks or air cover, and with insufficient artillery. They found the barbed wire intact and had to cut it with pruning shears under crossfire from machine guns. Some, riddled with bullets, remained caught on the barbs, where they dried out in the sun and freezing wind of the Aragonese steppe.

#

Nonetheless, there was calm, a calm I recall especially because of those huts I'll describe in a minute: a calm that wouldn't last long. We thought that the front, after shifting back and forth so many times, had stabilized and that we'd spend the winter behind the lines we'd finally occupied.

Autumn drew on; it was very rainy. That landscape, so dry when we'd first arrived, had turned into a sea of mud in which men and even mules could barely move. The mules sank almost up to their bellies as they forded streams at the bottoms of gullies, and the streams were swift and full. If the rains continued, and everything made us suspect that they would since the clouds kept getting thicker and blacker, the entire sector would be paralyzed by mud. The command told the front line battalions to dig in as best they could for the winter.

The soldiers in our battalion's four companies organized hut-building contests. It was no longer a matter of improvising shacks as we had in the summer, or when we'd expected to remain somewhere for a few days, but rather of building structures able to shield us from the heavy rains already coming down and from the snows and frosts that might perhaps still find us there. The votes were divided between two huts as different as Catalonia's regions. Six soldiers in the first company, all from Segarra, constructed a long stone vault with such skill--especially considering that they used no mortar since we had none--that you would have taken it for

X the last vestige of some medieval edifice were it not so modest in its

~~dimensions~~ ^{proportion}. They supported it from the inside with clay they'd fashioned to the shape and size they required. Once the vault had been closed, they removed the clay and used it to apply a thick rainproof coat all around it. At the two ends of that tunnel they built two walls, also dry, leaving an opening in one that could serve as door, window, and chimney. We were amazed at how quickly they'd created such a solid structure, able, in everyone's opinion, to withstand not only rain, snow, and sleet but heavy artillery if necessary.

If this shelter garnered votes for its solidity, the other won support through its ingenious lightness. It was built by seven soldiers in the third company, all from Cerdanya, following the practices of Pyrenean charcoal burners who have to spend weeks in the woods watching over kilns full of holm oak. They drove twelve trunks into the ground, leaning against each other in six pairs like flying buttresses and steadied by forked branches. Over this structure, they erected a scaffolding of big branches, and over the scaffolding they placed layer upon layer of thick, leafy pine branches that overlapped like tiles on a roof, all facing downward and so carefully positioned that even the most torrential downpours flowed off them.

Stung in his vanity, Captain Picó decided to build a hut too. "It doesn't look good," he said, "for a captain to be less handy than his troops." Impartiality obliges me to confess that although the construction he conceived and executed was larger and more comfortable than the others, it was built using various tricks and lacked the elegant simplicity we had so admired in the others.

He began by marking the outline of the building--which he wanted to be round--with a pickaxe. Helped by his orderly and a few gunners, he dug a narrow ditch five feet deep all around the circumference. To ensure that

the shelter would be perfectly circular, he had used a chisel on a string tied to a stake. Once the excavation was complete, he wanted to find the exact center again, because he said "you have to do things right; that's why we're irrational." My high school geometry was still fresh in my mind and I lent him a hand, a proof of learning that greatly enhanced my stature in his eyes. In that mathematical center he planted a trunk. After so many years, I have no reason to hide the fact that the trunk was not cut in the woods. Whether to save time or because he wanted them regular, all the trunks he used were telephone poles from the nearest village. The lines were out of service, of course. The village had been deserted since the last offensives and counteroffensives. He drove ten into the ground all around the circumference and between these ten and the one in the middle, like spokes on a wheel, he nailed ten joists: actual joists he'd taken from the village's ruined houses. Over the joists he laid down reed mats, also stolen from those houses, and he covered them with roof tiles since, as he pointed out, "they're free for the taking."

I visited him there from time to time, and I must admit that if the soldiers' huts harmonized with the landscape, that bizarre monstrosity was out of tune and even--why not say it?--induced a certain nausea. It was excessively high, even though the poles had been planted in the ditch. To make the walls, he had nailed up old doors, boards, and other scrap lumber scavenged from the ruins. Perhaps a sense of beauty was not among the sterling qualities that adorned our captain, though I carefully refrained from saying so. He'd furnished his hut with more ingenious tricks. Old munitions crates provided the raw materials for a table and even a bed that he filled with straw. (It was strongly suspected that the village's mattresses were lice-infested, having apparently served the enemy infantry before falling into our hands.) The center pole, bristling with hooks, was

where he hung his clothes, and halfway between it and the outside wall he made a circle of stones for his indoor campfire. It was for this reason that he'd wanted his hut to have such a high roof. The smoke accumulated on the ceiling and seeped out through a gap in the tiles. Even so you had to sit--or better still, lie--if you wanted to breathe without ~~choking~~^{coughing}. As soon as you stood up you'd be overwhelmed by a coughing fit. Troubled by this inconvenience, Picó didn't rest until he found--among the rubble in that village--a pipe long enough and nearly a foot in diameter, perhaps originally used for irrigation, that he hung from wires so that one end was above the fire and the other outdoors. He placed it so that instead of being vertical--~~which~~^{as} we would have thought necessary--it was almost horizontal. We were astonished when we saw how it sucked in the smoke, which poured out the other end in thick puffs as from a locomotive's smokestack.

If I arrived early enough in the morning, he'd offer me breakfast. Evaporated milk had become scarce around that time, so mostly we drank black coffee, which, though of extremely bad quality, was still available from the commissary. Holding a pan with a little oil in it over the coals, he'd fry pieces of bread. Then he'd empty the bread into his tin plate and pour hot coffee over it. That fried-bread-and-hot-coffee soup was delicious! He told me it had been his usual breakfast back in the good old days when he'd been a legionary in Morocco.

They'd built all those huts not far from the trenches. Since it was so rainy and muddy, they thought it was a great convenience not to have to walk far to get there and back when the guards changed. I don't know if I've already mentioned that our captain had enormous corns that made it hard for him to get around when it rained. He said not even a barometer was as good at forecasting the weather. It was at the beginning of that

unusually wet fall that I finally managed to persuade him to do something about his corns. Up till then all my suggestions had foundered on his unshakeable resolve to keep them. One evening we agreed that the next day I'd bring the necessary instruments. I had to remove them, "since if Doctor Puig tries to touch me," he warned, "I'll order every machine gun in my company to open fire on him."

The next day, when I appeared, they told me he was in the trenches. It was a sunny day for a change, and I found him chatting happily with two gunners--not at the bottom of the trench, which was muddy, but sitting on the parapet. They were in a good mood, enjoying that sweet and golden autumn sunshine. We could see the enemy trenches five miles away through our field glasses. The front had been absolutely quiet for days. We decided to perform the operation right there, above the muddy trench. I had Picó sit on a munitions crate; the parapet was wide in that spot, where we'd made a machine-gun nest. He jokingly asked the two soldiers to stand behind him and grip his shoulders, "since this is the first operation in my whole goddamned life and I don't know what my reflexes will be like."

I knelt before him and got ready to carefully remove the most spectacular of those corns, which were truly gigantic. I even heard him say, "Don't be surprised if I kick you right into the enemy trenches. It won't be on purpose; just a reflex, you understand," when suddenly what we least expected occurred.

A tremendous explosion sent Picó's hut sky-high. Like the others, it wasn't far from the trenches. Telephone poles, doors, joists, and roof tiles flew in all directions. Other shells exploded in the others, which blew apart in the same fashion, and fell on the parapets, bursting and scattering the sacks of earth. The shock waves from one blast flung us all

into the trench.

Picó and I picked ourselves up, unharmed except from the bruises from our violent fall; the two soldiers were dead. Some of the shells struck nearby rocks, and instead of sinking into the clay soil they sprayed shrapnel over a wide area. They hissed as they flew overhead. Some hit the trenches, slicing through the walls like carving knives. Shrapnel had struck those two soldiers full in the face, since they were standing, whereas Picó and I had been spared because we were lower down. The bombardment continued, and there was no doubt: they were softening us up with artillery. An assault by the infantry was bound to follow, since the enemy certainly wasn't wasting gunpowder on ceremonial salutes.

For the first time in the war, I understood the nature of blood lust. All I wanted was to kill--just like all the others.

Instead of trying to find Doctor Puig and the medics, I stayed in the trench with Picó. Peeking through a loophole between the sacks, we saw squads of enemy soldiers, widely separated, crawling through the brush. It was as though they'd suddenly appeared not far from our lines. The expression on their faces fascinated me: more than hatred, it was stupor. Our machine guns mowed them down as they tried to cut the barbed wire. They must have sent their tanks and planes to some other spot they deemed more important, and perhaps this was no more than what in military jargon is called a "diversion." They rarely attacked trenches anymore without tanks. Two men had managed to slip beneath the wire. Now they stood up and shouted, "Don't shoot! We're with you! Viva Rusia!"

That cry, so absurd and irrelevant, might have warned us, but one of our infantry lieutenants, who should have known better since he was a veteran, stuck his head over the parapet and welcomed them. One of the two climbed onto the sacks as though about to embrace him. The other,

2X
meanwhile, remained between the parapet and the wires and, shouldering his Mauser, shot the lieutenant, who silently toppled, face down, into the muddy trench. He was dead. The other soldier, standing on the parapet, was lobbing grenades ~~at~~ us. He drew them out of a big ~~bag~~ ^{pouch} slung across his shoulder and scattered them like someone sowing grain, calling all the while to his comrades to join in the attack and take advantage of our surprise.

X
I only vaguely recall what happened next. Picó sat behind his machine gun, calmly firing, but he soon ran out of ammunition. Thank God we had extra rifles, excellent Mausers, and a big crate of hand grenades. There were only six defenders in our trench. Picó and I had each picked up a Mauser and, when the barrels heated up from firing so much, we picked up ~~the~~ ² others while the first ones cooled off. From time to time he flung a grenade. "Bombs away!" Picó shouted. He looked strangely happy. The ones I threw didn't explode. He showed me how to pull the pins just before flinging them. I hadn't the slightest idea. I also don't know how I figured out how to fire a Mauser, since I'd never done it before. All I know is it was a thrill like nothing I'd ever felt.

We beat back that assault; not so the ones that followed it with tanks, planes, and far more troops. The line where we'd thought to spend the fall and winter was smashed in a dozen places. It was rout.

#

Perhaps it'll seem incomprehensible--and in fact it is--that right after the adventure I've just recounted I tried to desert to the enemy. It seems totally incongruous to me when I remember it. Maybe war and peace are like sleeping and waking: awake, we can't fathom the sleepers we were before. Men at peace can't understand men at war. So many years later, I'm equally ashamed of firing on our enemies and trying to join them

shortly thereafter.

It was a huge rout. Brigades and entire divisions had collapsed, and soldiers from all of them mingled in a chaotic stream of retreating men. It was a panic, so similar to a nightmare. I was lost in the midst of that terrified, fleeing mass. I didn't recognize a single face. I heard them talking about divisions I hadn't even heard of: the Durruti Division, the Líster Division, and God knows how many others . . . No one could help me find--not just our battalion and our brigade--but our division, as unknown to them as theirs were to me. I spent days and days trying to get my bearings, to link up with my friends. In that confusion, it was like searching for a needle in a haystack.

And then one evening, out of the blue, a captain from the medical corps "inducted" me into his company. I can't recall exactly what division it belonged to; all I know is they were anarchists. The captain-doctor was short and wiry, with a thin mustache that made him look like some working-class neighborhood's Don Juan. He winked a lot and had an inexhaustible stock of off-color jokes, almost all about priests.

Why should I have stayed in that division, where I felt utterly out of place? I couldn't stand that regimen of scabrous anecdotes for long--in any case they were always the same--and one night when the anarcho-medical Don Juan was snoring . . . yes, I rose from my pallet and tiptoed out. I took my knapsack and my portable telescope, which I hadn't yet lost and wouldn't lose until the very end of the war.

I started marching, alone, in the opposite direction from our retreating troops. The turmoil in the area was so great that anything was possible. I walked all night without anyone asking where I was going.

The first light of dawn found me in a grove of junipers. I spent the whole day there, curled up in a kind of nest. The silence grew dense and

heavy. The solitude was so suffocating that, when some stray bullet whistled by from time to time, I felt comforted and less alone. The two armies were some miles apart, and I was approximately halfway between them. In my knapsack I had four loaves of bread and four cans of condensed milk I'd swiped from that anarchist battalion before going AWOL, and that was enough to keep me going for four days.

What I had in mind wasn't easy, since I didn't know where the front lines were and, on the other hand, I wasn't sure exactly what I wanted to do: maybe change sides, or maybe reach the French border, walking at night and hiding by day. The truth is I didn't know and abandoned myself to chance or Providence. The only thing I knew for sure was that I was burdened by a constant sadness that was eating me up inside. Soleràs had vanished from our brigade, Lluís might be dead, and how could I be sure that the same hadn't happened to Picó, our major, and Doctor Puig? How could I be sure anything was left of our battalion, our brigade, our entire division when I could find no trace of them.

When night fell at last I set off again, taking my bearings from the stars. First I wanted to find out where the fascists were, to get an idea of the situation. But the only thing I knew was that they must be to the west. I therefore walked toward Sagittarius, which at that time of year appears above the horizon where the sun sets. When Sagittarius also set, I used the Milky Way as my guide. How brightly it shone above the steppe in that dry, clear air and intensely black sky! It's the most vivid memory I have of those strange nights. It was like a cloud of tiny diamonds, and more than once I stopped to gaze up at it with my telescope, while at other times I felt my loneliness like a claw at my throat. How I would have wept--I, who am such a crybaby--how I would have wept like a lost child without the stars to keep me company! and the scent of thyme, the

sole vegetation--along with stunted junipers--in that deserted landscape: the tart scent of thyme carried along on the wind's icy breath . . .

Sometimes I wonder if it wasn't another fit of sleepwalking, so dazedly did I wander with my eyes on the Milky Way. Today, many years later, I wish I had indeed been sleepwalking and that my conscious will had in no way been involved, for now I feel it was treason, something I never felt then. But no. Sleepwalkers remember nothing and don't even know they've sleepwalked unless they're told.

There's no point trying to delude myself. I was fully aware that I intended to desert.

2X The next night I heard far-off voices: the first I'd heard in three days. Again I wondered what to do. I realized that it was almost impossible for me to reach the Pyrenees. Should I turn back? But why, if neither Lluís nor Soleràs was with the brigade and perhaps Picó, the major, and the doctor were dead or captured? I was about to make one of the biggest decisions in my life: to choose my enemy. Till then I'd been on one side without having chosen it, simply because of circumstances. It hadn't occurred to me that the others were my enemies; they were simply "the others." It truly had never crossed my mind! Not even when I was shooting and tossing hand grenades at them in a fit of drunkenness that, once past, had left me feeling deeply ashamed. My instincts had overwhelmed me, making me act as though I were someone else. The same would have happened under the same circumstances if I'd been on the other side. To me that was plain as day. It really wasn't because they were enemies that I'd shot at them in that moment of lunacy; it was for other, more inexplicable reasons. It had been that way ever since I'd enlisted. I'd simply fought with the side where I'd found myself when the war began. That's how it had been so far. Now I was going to choose;

from now on, of my own free will, my former friends would be my enemies and vice versa.

The voices were now right there, some thirty steps away.

#

I heard them so vaguely that I didn't realize ~~that~~ I couldn't make out what they were saying. It was only after a long while that I noticed: those strange noises didn't include a single intelligible word.

"They're Moors"--and I crouched down between two junipers whose branches made a kind of hollow. Those nasal and guttural sounds were more and more perceptible, as though they were coming closer. I cowered like a cornered beast. I hadn't thought about Moors till I heard those sharp, whiny voices, but as I strained to hear them they seemed less sharp and whiny: they were simply incomprehensible. "Maybe they're Basques."

I knew the remnants of the Basque army, survivors of its desperate last stand, had disembarked in Gascony, crossing France to join the Catalan troops. "Providence is on my side," I suddenly thought. "Thank God! Better Basques than Moors!"

Sometimes the voices came closer and sometimes they moved away, as though a patrol were scouring the woods. Despite the cold, I was sweating. I could feel drops on my upper lip, while another trickled down my back like quicksilver.

Meanwhile, I caught sight of a campfire amid the junipers, about a hundred yards from my hiding place. They'd just lit it, using dried furze, and the flames crackled like fireworks. I crossed myself and crawled forth. I had to find out once and for all who they were. I'd stopped sweating and felt exceptionally alert. A thorny branch brushed against my cheek like a steel claw. I managed to crawl up to the clearing without being noticed, enough to see their faces, which were illumined by the flames as

in an old oil painting.

What faces! God in Heaven! What faces!

I stood up, ready to run for my life. It was an utterly idiotic thing to do.

Bullets whizzed around me like a swarm of ravenous mosquitoes. I had only one wish: to fly. And I did fly, but down instead of up . . . till my flight was brusquely halted and I felt ~~the stupor~~ *as stunned as* a bird felled by a bullet.

I tried to move my legs, which wouldn't obey me, as though they belonged to someone else. They seemed alien when I touched them. I heard the sounds the Moors made as they came and went, their piercing voices. Then all the noises stopped and a strange silence fell.

Why couldn't I see the stars above my head? The night had been clear until the moment I'd fallen. But fallen where? That silence, that bitter cold, that impenetrable darkness, that inability to move my legs . . . O God, if only morning would come! But as soon as it did, they'd find me. As I lay motionless, the damp cold seeped into my bones. Then the voices approached again. O God, please make the night last forever!

But then--a miracle!--I understood them. I understood everything those Moors were saying. My nerves relaxed, my legs obeyed me, I saw the starry sky again--the Milky Way like a cloud of diamonds--and I burst into sobs.

I wept and wept, unable to contain myself. They were speaking Catalan. I wanted to shout to them for help, but I fainted.

"Shit!" This was the first word I heard when I awoke. And opening my eyes, I saw the face I'd least expected: Major Rosich's cross-eyed orderly. "Shit! What the hell are you doing at the bottom of this millpond? Good thing it's empty!"

And cross-eyes started telling me the latest news, still excited over the battle they'd just been in. "We pushed back the Moors. Those bastards! Piles of dead and wounded everywhere. What a mess, but the rout's over; we're not running anymore."

"And the major: where is he?"

"Not far away. The Moors almost surrounded us. And guess what: we found Lluís! We found him by chance in a field hospital, a long way from our brigade. He's badly wounded; a real serious wound! The medics from an anarchist division picked him up and took him to Almirante without bothering to tell us. It's every brigade, every division for itself, you know? Did you hear about that anarchist division that opened fire on some Communists? Shit . . ."

#

But it was hopeless trying to persuade my aunt that there were battalions and battalions, brigades and brigades; that the air we breathed was healthy and had nothing to do with the stench in Barcelona. In her eyes it was simple. There were two sides: wheat and chaff separated by barbed wire. To avoid quarrels I would have kept away from her house (she still lived in that mansion in Sarrià), but a ridiculous piece of bad luck forced me to call upon her.

As soon as I'd gotten off the train, I took a streetcar, since taxis were so scarce. At every stop, more passengers climbed aboard; we were squeezed together on the platform like grapes in a wine press. And suddenly I felt a warm, supple body pressed so tightly against mine that I could feel her heart beating. Her thick red hair tickled my mouth, and her perfume made my head swim. All at once, two yellow eyes stared into mine with brazen lucidity. How could a pair of eyes be yellow? It was a calm, cynical gaze like no other I've ever seen. I felt her squirm, rising on

tiptoe to press more tightly against me. As best I could, I elbowed my way through the crowd and jumped from the moving streetcar. "My God," I thought, "it's all because of my uniform. My cassock made even the most brazen ones respect me."

Without thinking, I felt my inside pocket. My wallet was gone.

What was I to do? "This panther," I thought because of her yellow eyes, "this sea-panther must have gotten off at the next stop and vanished among the millions of anonymous faces. It'd be like searching for a needle in a haystack." What's odd is I couldn't help feeling a kind of sympathy for her: the skill with which she'd lifted my wallet filled me with admiration. "This panther," I repeated, "this sea-panther . . ." Why a sea-panther? "A sea-panther floating in an ocean of women." Soleràs's strange ramblings suddenly came back to me.

With my hand against my chest--where the absent wallet had left a depressing void--I tried like a fool to remember whether there had been girls with yellow eyes before the war. That bothered me more than my missing wallet. Suddenly I realized that I had no money to buy lunch and that I'd have to sleep on a ^{park} bench unless I went to headquarters. But how could I show up there without the papers justifying my presence in Barcelona, which had disappeared with my wallet? They'd throw me in jail as a deserter until the matter was cleared up.

I had no choice but to go ^{up} to Sarrià and ask my aunt for money.

After the inevitable emotional effusions, because after all we are aunt and nephew, we had the absurd argument I'd been hoping to avoid.

"Who's forcing you to stay with that ragged rabble?"

"But if you could see the others! They're even more ragged, I assure you. After all, the whole textile industry's in republican territory."

"Don't you realize that your friends have murdered nine of our

relatives?"

"What do you want me to do about it? Desert to the other side? Not a day goes by without someone switching trenches, but it works both ways. That's what you don't understand. And they all do it for the same reason: disgusted by the atrocities in the rear. Soleràs, a guy who disappeared with 'no forwarding address,' as they say at the post office, talked a lot of nonsense but this time he hit the nail on the head. He said if the war lasted long enough, all the republican soldiers would end up with the fascists and vice versa."

My aunt wouldn't listen. In her eyes, the others were Knights of the Holy Grail--tall, elegant, blond, smooth-shaven, dressed in clean, neatly pressed uniforms--and bearing swords, noble swords in their hands: swords like lilies, like candles . . .

#

But let's get back to what brought me to Barcelona in December 1937. Everything started with those letters I'd read on the sly. Ever since my earliest memories, I've suffered from this disgraceful weakness: I'd listen behind the door to my aunt's whispered conversations with the monsignor, I'd read letters she absentmindedly left on her table and even try to sneak a peek over the shoulder of someone reading a letter beside me on a streetcar. I'm not sensual but I'm nosy, as though the attraction others feel toward the flesh were something I felt too--but toward their lives, which is just as shameful or more so.

Everything started with those letters Lluís jealously guarded at the bottom of his knapsack.

Once the front had been reestablished after all those retreats, they'd sent what was left of our brigade to regroup on a "stable front." Between our positions and the enemy's lay a deserted valley whose five or six

hamlets had been abandoned by the peasants because of the shells from both sides that fell there. There were eight or ten miles--as the crow flies--between our trenches and the fascists, which meant we were out of range of even their most powerful guns. Moreover, there had been a heavy snowfall. As long as there were three feet of snow in those mountains no new attacks were possible: complete tranquility! That's why they'd sent us there. We'd suffered heavy losses during our recent battles: lots of dead, lots of wounded, and above all lots of missing in action--as is normal in routs. The brigade had to be reconstituted. We had to get our wounded back, find those who'd disappeared, receive new weapons to replace the ones we'd lost or that had been destroyed. And finally, we needed new recruits to fill the huge gaps in our ranks. All this would take time.

On that "stable front," our battalion occupied two villages: Santa Espina del Purroy and Villar del Purroy. "Purroy" is the name of a stream that flows through the two villages. The highway, which is nothing more than a dirt road, runs alongside the stream. Villar is six miles from Santa Espina.

Both villages were uninhabited and falling into ruins. They'd been captured, abandoned, and recaptured early in the war, burned by the anarchists and fascists and bombarded during the most recent battles. Villar, which was more in the rear, housed the command post and medical corps; the gunners were in Santa Espina, which was closer to the trenches. The four infantry companies--or what was left of them--occupied positions along the crests of some hills, looking down on the deserted valley and fairly far from the two villages.

In those mountains and woods, more or less completely forsaken by their inhabitants during a year and half, wild game had multiplied prodigiously. Our men shot more rabbits, hares, and partridges than we

could eat, especially since the snowfall had made it child's play to follow their tracks. In the abandoned cellars we found oil and wine, almonds, walnuts, and coal: everything those unlucky peasants had left behind in their hasty flight. And then there were the hamlets in the valley, where the most unexpected things could be found: for instance a hurdy-gurdy, which the gunners brought back in triumph on one of their mules. Sometimes our men ran into enemy patrols, with whom they shared the booty amicably. Why should they kill each other when everything was peaceful on that front?

I resided in Villar with the head medic--Doctor Puig--and often went to Santa Espina to visit my friends among the gunners. Captain Picó had settled into the one house that was still intact. It had belonged to the biggest local landowner, Don Andalecio, murdered by the anarchists at the beginning of the war. They'd also tried to burn down his house, but the extremely thick walls had withstood the flames. There were big sitting rooms and big bedrooms, for it was an enormous house, but the walls and ceilings were blackened by smoke and all the furniture was gone. The dining room occupied a large part of the ground floor. The fireplace was big enough to span three benches, which nonetheless were quite long and had very high backs. Picó had brought them from another house and had placed one on each side and a third in the middle, making a kind of three-sided square facing the fire. I recall them so clearly because our social evenings took place on those benches when I visited Santa Espina: the interminable gatherings that fall and winter, before and after the women's arrival.

Picó built huge fires, using beams he'd salvaged from the ruined houses. Often, on rainy nights, we heard the noise of collapsing walls here and there in the village: a dark sound, a confusion of toppling stones that

made me feel sad to think of some poor family returning to its native village once the war was over and finding its home gone.

Once he'd been released from the field hospital in Almirate, Lluís had been assigned to the gunners' company, since nothing was left of his infantry unit. In theory, they'd assigned him to an artillery squad, but the guns (70-caliber field guns and 85-caliber mortars) only existed in our imaginations and on paper. Apparently the hospital in Almirate had been a real pigsty, but luckily Lluís hadn't spent much time there, just long enough for them to extract a Mauser bullet from the muscle in his left arm and for the wound to heal. But Lluís was acting strange. We attributed his bad mood to Soleràs's disappearance, since they'd been inseparable since high-school days.

We celebrated Lluís's return with a supper at Santa Espina thrown by Captain Picó. The major, Doctor Puig, and I set out from Villar in our trusty Ford, which had survived so many battles and routs, "more loyal to the Catalan army," the major said, "than all those political commissars put together." At that time we found ourselves without a political commissar--perfectly fine from our point of view. The major, who couldn't stand the sight of them, assured us that "they all ran away" in our recent battles, an accusation by no means true--or at least not always true. What was certain was that we didn't miss them in our battalion.

"Now," said Major Rosich, "we can offer our soldiers a hurdy-gurdy instead of a political commissar. Perhaps it's not so educational, but it's a hell of a lot more fun."

It was during that supper in Lluís's honor that Picó told us about his latest find in no man's land--that is, in the deserted valley. He said it was a silver goblet inlaid with gold, "certainly from Moorish times." He had his cook bring it to him, full of fine old wine, so he could drink to our

health.

"Captain!" I blurted out.

"What's the matter?"

"Where did you find that goblet? That's a chalice!"

The major started. "But Picó, did you find it in a church? Haven't you ever taken Communion?"

"Communion!" and uttering this word, Picó dropped the chalice, splattering wine on the flagstones. As I picked it up he muttered, "Cruells, if you think I don't know what a chalice is . . . I even studied in a seminary."

"A lot of good it did you," Doctor Puig commented.

Lluís looked gloomy. He barely said a word during the meal.

Nonetheless, he insisted that I stay the night in Santa Espina. Doctor Puig raised no objections, since the medical corps had little to do at that time.

It was the first time I'd spent the night with Picó and Lluís. Later on, I often made the journey from Villar to Santa Espina in the cabriolet, which Picó sent to fetch me so I could eat supper with them and sleep there. In a ruined stable they'd found a cabriolet, very light and with enormous wheels. One of the springs was broken. Picó soldered it back together one morning. He was remarkably handy. The trial runs were a success. Drawn by one of the gunners' mules, it could cover the distance between the two villages in three quarters of an hour.

That cabriolet also proved very useful for expeditions to no man's land. Some time after that first supper in Santa Espina, an order had come down from the brigade's commander forbidding our soldiers to visit those hamlets in the valley; only Picó and Lluís were allowed to go. The order was in response to a phenomenon the commander found disgraceful: our soldiers had organized soccer matches with those from the fascist lines. He

wanted to nip this fraternization with the enemy in the bud.

In Santa Espina all three of us--Lluís, Picó, and myself--slept in the same room on the top floor, near the attic. Picó had chosen it because the flames had barely touched it. That night, the first one I and Lluís spent there, Picó warned me, "No 1902s[✓] allowed out the window."

It's true that the window looked out on the main street, but the street was nothing but a pile of rubble.

"This village is a shit hole," Lluís grumbled. "You don't really think with this goddamned cold we're going out to the stable in our pajamas to piss!"

"To do a 1902" was a common expression in our brigade; every brigade developed its own slang in the course of the war. The commander of the Flatfoot Brigade was named Josep, "which in itself," said Major Rosich, "is in no way reprehensible." For his saint's day, our major had sent him a bottle of sauterne, "genuine 1902 sauterne," with a card: "I send you this gift, to which all our officers have contributed." I needn't bother to say what their contributions consisted of. "We hope you will accept it as a token," continued the card, of which many copies were made, "of the brotherly love that unites all republican brigades. May this bottle remind you of our high regard and fondest wishes."

So Picó forbade us to "do a 1902" out the window into the street. He saw himself as the feudal lord of Santa Espina, and therefore responsible for its inhabitants.

"This isn't Villar," he said. "I'm in charge here, and I insist upon culture, cleanliness, and propriety."

Then he showed us a "cultural treasure" he'd amassed: a huge suitcase full of books. They were slender paperbacks, dogeared, piled up in confusion. We didn't have to pore over them long to figure out what genre

they belonged to.

"It's my anti-pornography campaign," he explained. "The soldiers are too young and ignorant for such 'complete works.' So I confiscate them. That way I keep our men safe from unhealthy reading matter and also consecrate my own evenings to literature. Two birds with one stone! A little romance helps me doze off . . ."

One rainy night, we'd blown out the candles but I couldn't get to sleep. Picó was snoring: loud, regular, resonant snores that gave me a feeling of peace and security. I slowly eased myself off my straw mattress (we each had one, spread on the floor). The corn husks rustled with each movement I made. My intention was to do what Picó had forbidden, since I was suffering from an urgent need that would brook no delay. Once I was out of bed, the cold made my teeth chatter and I thought of Picó's dentures. He'd left them on the only chair in a glass of water. Watch out for that chair! The little window, low and paneless, was outlined at the end of the room. I approached it on tiptoe, trying to avoid the other stumbling block: that suitcase with the "complete works." I reached the window. The rain, meanwhile, had turned to snow that fell thick, soft, and silent. There was no light but the vague glow from the falling flakes. The sky looked darker than the earth. A few stray flakes blew into the room. Picó hadn't heard me and was still snoring. Lluís was fast asleep too; I could hear his steady breathing. I was groping my way back to bed, hugging the wall, when my hand touched Lluís's knapsack, hanging from a hook. That knapsack . . . Lluís's knapsack. My hand slipped into it and before I knew what I was doing, it came out holding that bundle of letters.

That bundle of letters that had so piqued my curiosity! I'd watched Lluís read and reread them obsessively. Once I'd asked whom they were

from. He'd frowned angrily and replied, "From my wife." That was all I knew.

The temptation was too much for me. I took that bundle of letters and went downstairs. A blast of Arctic air blew up the stairwell, and my teeth kept chattering. On the landing, I exploded in a tremendous sneeze. I didn't move for a few seconds. Silence. They hadn't heard me.

There were live coals in the fireplace. I stirred them with the tongs. The embers glowed with a thousand tiny lights. How cozy those embers were on such a chilly night! I lit an oil lamp and, sitting on one of those long benches, began to read.

Now I feel a sense of shame that weighs on me like a boulder. I know that reading those letters was one of the most disgraceful acts in my life. What small, delicate handwriting; and the sweet warmth from those embers! I read avidly, more and more intrigued by the unknown life I was discovering. My concern grew with every letter as I sensed an unhappy ending--unhappy for Lluís . . . What a relief! Nothing irrevocable, nothing ruined forever. Things could still be patched up. All they needed was a third party willing to try; and that providential third party would be me!

A wave of tenderness flowed over me. Life was beautiful! There were good deeds to be done, wounds to heal, troubled friends whose lost happiness could be restored. At that moment, I even felt that the impulse to read those letters had come from on high. Yes, it was quite clear: a voice had called me! I could do so much good, now that I understood the problem!

It was very late. I'd spent five hours reading letters and more letters. I tiptoed into our bedroom and put the bundle back where it belonged.

"Life is beautiful," I thought as I crawled into bed. "If I could consult Doctor Gallifa about this matter . . ." But where could he be? And what if it was him? The most ordinary of the apostles . . . With a delicious shiver, like a cat's, I curled up under my four cotton blankets. Picó was still snoring, Lluís hadn't heard a thing, the snow fell steadily. The snow! I had a sudden inspiration. This was already a "stable front"; now, with the snowfall . . . A few days earlier, we'd found out that the officers in the Flatfoot Brigade (stationed on that front, just like us) had secretly sent for their wives to come and spend Christmas with them. Lluís couldn't go see her in Barcelona. There were no leaves allowed; the Ministry of War was very strict on this point. But she could come to Santa Espina. She had to come; it was crucial that they make up.

My bed had warmed up, and I snuggled under the covers, full of hope and tenderness. Life was so beautiful! "Other people's lives!" I thought abruptly, and I suddenly felt like crying. I was overcome by drowsiness and self-pity, but that drowsiness and that self-pity were poignant and sweet. It's so nice to drift off to sleep feeling good, generous, better than others; so nice to curl up in a warm, dry bed while outside it keeps snowing and snowing . . .

#

And that's why I was in Barcelona in December 1937.

But my wallet was gone, and with it all my papers, those precious "travel documents" we'd all drawn up together: the report from Lieutenant Puig of the medical corps to Major Rosich informing him that "it is of the utmost necessity that Second Lieutenant Cruells journey to Barcelona in order to procure much-needed medicines for our valiant soldiers in their struggle against fascism," followed by an official letter from the brigade's commander to our major (the commander had promised to look the other

way); and finally, a letter from Major Rosich to Second Lieutenant Cruells ordering him "to go immediately and in person to Barcelona on this vital mission." All this paperwork was duly stamped by the inevitable guards at every crossroad on the way. If at least that sea-panther had left me my documents! As soon as, thanks to my aunt, I had money again, I sent a telegram to my battalion asking for a new set of papers. If the military police stopped me in the meantime, how would I justify my presence in Barcelona?

#

My first visit had been to Doctor Puig's wife. She lived in a conspicuously sumptuous apartment with an excess of gilt-framed mirrors and imitation-crystal chandeliers. A uniformed maid showed me into the drawing room. I felt guilty about the footprints my military boots caked with dried mud left on those parquet floors polished to a high gloss. Those footprints stood out like rabbits' tracks in the Aragonese snow. Mrs. Puig made me wait half an hour. I'd been foolish enough to go in the morning, and perhaps she was still making herself up. Her toilette, as I later learned, was in fact both elaborate and painstaking. Finally she appeared. She wrinkled her nose slightly as she haughtily looked me over. She was tall, elegant, and curvaceous, with platinum-blond hair and aquamarine eyes, intensely blue--one of those women who are conscious of their splendor. I've always felt abashed with women of that sort, and though I tried to speak naturally, I felt I wasn't bringing it off. She listened with a mixture of curiosity, shock, and surprise, mildly ironic, glancing at me mistrustfully out of the corner of her eye. She'd already received a letter from her husband and knew the basic plan. She was willing to make the trip "since my husband wants me to go and I must obey him." I explained the situation, begged her pardon, and got lost in a maze of trivial details,

unable to shake off my shyness.

X "It's a unique opportunity that may not come again (and God knows how much longer this war ^{will} last): a front this stable, with so much snow on the ground . . ."

"Why doesn't he come to Barcelona? That'd be a lot simpler."

X "It can't be done. They're not giving leaves. We were lucky to get one for our entire brigade on a totally quiet front. For the time being, we can't ask for more. A front with no activity whatsoever . . . We're out of range of their artillery . . . 70-caliber field guns, for example . . . a field gun's range is a kilometer for every centimeter ^{te} of caliber, and we're more than seven kilometers from their lines."

I'd gotten thoroughly tangled up in these ridiculous explanations, while she gazed at me as if to ask, "Why should I care?"

"I'm telling you all this because I see that in Barcelona people don't understand what a haven of peace a stable front can be. Women and children can spend Christmas there in peace and quiet, much better fed than here. We have more food than we can eat!"

"I wouldn't dream of bringing the children," she replied with the dignity women of her sort affect when they talk about their children. "I try to shield them from bad examples . . ."

After receiving her husband's letters, she'd decided that the kids would stay at her parents' house. Her father, Doctor Puig had told me, owned the biggest pork stall in the Boqueria Market; filthy rich. When I found myself in the street again, my mouth was dry from so much blathering. A new wallet pressed against my heart, stuffed with bills thanks to my aunt. What peace of mind a fat wallet can bestow! There was a kind of buzzing in the air, and I heard far-off explosions. The streets were empty, as if the entire city were dead. Suddenly sirens started

wailing and I realized what was happening. The blasts were getting closer. I started walking. Picó's apartment was only a half-hour away on foot. On the way, I stopped in a bar--the only one in which the owner had stood his ground instead of heading for a shelter--to quench my thirst and satisfy the opposite need. "For you soldiers," he said when I emerged from the toilet, "these air raids must be kid stuff. I've even gotten used to them . . ."

X Mrs. Picó let me in. I found myself in a small, cheerful apartment whose wooden chairs the mistress of the house had painted bright colors (she herself told me this): fire-engine red, ~~apple~~ ^{apple} green, and canary yellow, with gold knobs. She looked between twenty-five and thirty years old, small, slender, very dark, excitable, expansive.

"My husband also studied to be a priest," she told me, grinning as though the very idea were hilarious, "so you know I've got a soft spot for seminarians."

"How do you know that's what I am?"

"He said so in his letter. He wrote me all about it. He writes so well, and his handwriting is just beautiful! I know everything: who you are, why you came to Barcelona. And I'm so happy! A year and half without seeing him . . . I bet he's been up to all kinds of tricks! I also know it was you who thought up this wonderful idea for Christmas. But . . ."

As she looked me up and down, her eyes widened in astonishment and she said, "Hurry up, come in the bedroom and look at yourself in the wardrobe mirror! You must be very absentminded!"

Staring into the mirror after she had charitably shut the door, I understood what she'd meant. I hadn't buttoned my fly in the bar's toilet, and my shirt was sticking out.

She was waiting for me with a glass of vermouth when I returned to

the dining room. It must have been about noon. I felt embarrassed.

"Listen, it could happen to anybody. Don't worry about it."

She laughed merrily. I thought it was lucky something so ludicrous had happened to me there. If it had been at Mrs. Puig's house! Mrs. Picó apologized.

"You'll have to drink it without olives, anchovies, or potato chips. There's nothing to eat! But you can buy all the liquor you want."

Then she showed me various proofs of her husband's talents. I'd already noticed that she called him by his last name. "Picó's so clever!" She was especially eager to show me the extremely complicated overhead light in the dining room, which had bulbs of different colors that could be combined in various ways: red, green, blue, yellow, or mixed together. She showed me other gadgets he'd invented. "It's because he's so clever that they ~~admitted him to~~ *gave him a job in* the science department at the university." I thought of that pedal-driven fan Picó had contrived to keep away the flies back in the good old days in Olivel. In fact, he was a brilliant do-it-yourselfer and I could see that his wife idolized him.

When I left, I set out to see Major Rosich's wife, who lived in a big, dark apartment on Cervelló Street: one of those narrow lanes that lead to the Boqueria Market. The furniture was from the end of the last century, heavy, inherited, out-of-date, and respectable. Mrs. Rosich was short and dark like Mrs. Picó, but plump and with some gray hairs. You could see she was well past forty. Serious but affable, she called Marieta to come and meet me. The girl looked tall for a nine-year-old, skinny, with a sallow complexion and huge dark eyes. Her mother told her to greet me, and she made a little curtsy. Suddenly she let fly a question that she would repeat over and over.

"They won't kill my daddy, will they?"

"Of course not!" I exclaimed in surprise. "Of course they won't kill him. Why should they kill a wonderful man like him?"

Mrs. Rosich asked how we could get past the military checkpoints. The presence of women--except those who already lived there--was strictly forbidden at the front. Since the Rosichs--unlike the rest of us--were a military family, she was the only wife who asked this question.

"We'll take the train to Puebla de Híjar. The war zone begins there. Our Ford will be waiting at the station. You'll slip some peasant clothes over the ones you're wearing, and everything will work out fine. The peasant women often ask for lifts in our cars and trucks from one village to another. We've found lots of peasant clothes in no man's land: all shapes and sizes! We've thought of everything! Needless to say, once we reach Villar you can take off those clothes and make yourselves comfortable. Your husband's in charge there. We'll be 'in our own fief,' as Picó says. There's nothing to worry about."

Those "travel documents" still hadn't arrived. In my telegram to Major Rosich, I'd asked him to send them to his wife's address. I was starting to fret about the delay, which could sink the whole carefully planned operation. I told Mrs. Rosich I'd come back in the evening.

X It was two o'clock. I was starving, and I could feel the warmth of that fat wallet against my heart. I found myself in the labyrinth of narrow streets around the Boqueria Market. The sign outside a tavern caught my eye: sea bass with herbs and garlic. The smell of baking fish made my mouth water. I sat down at a round, marble-topped table they had set out on the sidewalk. Despite the time of year, I preferred the street to that tavern's rather ~~inspicious-looking~~ ^{dubious} interior. More than the cold, I felt the dampness of those Barcelona neighborhoods near the sea, a damp that seeped through the soles of my feet and crept up my legs. From my table

I could see the vast market, disturbingly empty. Hardly anything had been sold there for months. A woman dressed in rags, who'd been picking through the meager garbage, passed by and shouted, "Stuff yourself, draft-dodger! My sons can do the fighting!"

I wanted to tell her this was the first day I'd spent in Barcelona since the war began, that the sea bass was all I'd eaten and would eat all day. But she was already far away, though I still could hear her curses.

"They're all the same! Bunch of bastards! Fascists and republicans: all sons of bitches!"

That one dish cost me twenty-five duros. This was what an entire month's room and board had cost before the war. My aunt hadn't wanted me to be mixed up with the other seminarians, "who might be the sons of concierges or God knows who else," and so she'd placed me in a residence for seminarians of good family. I suddenly recalled--I'm not sure why--the big room where twenty of us slept in as many iron bedsteads. As the night wore on, the air grew thick as water and we were like twenty rapturous fishes, lethargic sturgeons each lying in his narrow bed while our dreams leaked forth like a gas heavier than air. The long white walls were like screens on which absurd subconscious images were projected. Our steady breathing was like a muted concert . . . Why did all this come back to me now as I stared at the check? The sight of that exorbitant price made me suddenly understand how hateful I must have appeared to that old woman. I knew, as everyone at the front knew, that in Barcelona people ate little and badly. We knew it but couldn't imagine exactly how it worked. Suddenly I understood the feverish look that had surprised me in the eyes of so many girls, that those greedy mouths and slender waists were caused by hunger and hunger alone. "Poor sea-panther," I thought, and as I rose from the table, I saw her!

#

Right in front of the tavern, on the other side of the street, there was a high, narrow door that had caught my attention because it was surrounded by copies of the same poster: Liberatorios de prostitución." I'd already seen it in the course of my wanderings, along with "Build tanks, tanks, tanks!" and other justly celebrated specimens. That one had left me puzzled because I couldn't figure out what it depicted: a house? a woman sitting and sewing? various women, each reading a book? or holding babies? Well, that high, narrow door had just opened and in its shadowy entrance, to my amazement, I saw the girl from the streetcar. Her yellow eyes gazed at me calmly. Apparently she didn't recognize me.

"I was going out," she said. "This is a bad time of day."

"When should I come back?"

"After midnight."

She had a strong foreign accent. At that moment the old woman reappeared at the end of the street where there was a pile of trash, and as she poked around in it she shot us a look full of hatred and malice. She began singing, loud enough so we could hear her:

Allons, enfants de la grand'pute,

le jour de merde est arrivé.

"She's crazy," the sea-panther said. "Don't pay any attention to her. She knows I'm French, so she sings that to make me mad."

"Did you say I should come back after midnight?" I asked, surprised at the hour. "Anyway, all I want is my papers; the money doesn't matter. I'm even willing to give you more in exchange for those documents . . . five-hundred, let's say."

#

She peered at me.

"Come on up."

The steps in that narrow, dirty stairwell were worn. We went through a little parlor, furnished in appallingly bad taste, where other women who didn't even glance up at us were sitting. She led me to her room, at the end of a long corridor whose doors were numbered as in a hotel. In fact, I thought we were in a hotel: a fleabag of the lowest order. In any case her room could have been a monk's cell--it was that small and bare. There was even a plaster image of the grotto at Lourdes on the night table, along with a wick burning in a glass of oil.

The panther started pulling her blouse over her head.

"What are you doing?" I exclaimed. She looked at me, puzzled, perhaps wondering if I was crazy. "All I want is my papers! The military police . . . I need them! You can keep the money but give me back my papers!"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

I could see she was mad, and now I realized that her hair was black, while the one on the streetcar--as I well remembered--had been a redhead. I tried to apologize, embarrassed by my blunder, but my excuses were so clumsy that she understood nothing except that I'd taken her for a pickpocket. As I stumbled down the stairs, she stood on the landing, showering me with the foulest curses I'd heard in my life.

#

It was four o'clock when I reached the house in Pedralbes where Trini lived. She wasn't there. The maid showed me into the drawing room, saying she wouldn't be away long. Everything I saw filled me with surprise.

It's not that her letters had conveyed a false impression. In reality, I hadn't thought much about what her house was like. All I knew about her

was what Lluís had told me and what I'd read. At the time I didn't ask what right I had to meddle in the private life of a woman I didn't know. I felt certain that I was doing the right thing, that it was my duty to help Lluís win back his wife's love. I didn't realize that the path was slippery. All I saw was the good I could do for Lluís and Trini--Trini, that converted anarchist, daughter of a couple who practiced "free love" and herself in the same situation, who was about to take another false step and perhaps ruin her life forever.

I looked around: not a trace of bohemian disorder. The house, in the upper part of Pedralbes, was surrounded by pines and cypresses. An enormous bougainvillea peeked in at the windows, in full bloom even though it was December. The windows commanded a view of the entire city, with the sea in the background. The few pieces of furniture seemed to have been chosen as one chooses lifelong friends. In front of one of the windows stood a Louis-Philippe armchair with a winged back, upholstered in green-and-yellow striped satin and with lace edging around the wings. From that chair one could see the yard, with a bare lime tree in the foreground. I marveled at the sight of that armchair, that lime tree. Everything was just as she'd described it in her letters, so real and so close. "This is the armchair," I thought, "that's the lime tree; there's the table and the lamp, here's where she was reading about geology when she heard those shots . . ." In a corner, I saw the mahogany secretary, so light it seemed to be trying to pass unnoticed; and above it, the oval portrait of the Carlist colonel. It was the only picture in the room. The white, bare walls made me think of lovingly ironed linen tablecloths. The winter light streamed in obliquely, filtering through the curtains, and came to rest on that mahogany polished by years, on the yellow-and-green-striped satin, and on that romantic colonel with his big red beret and

enormous sideburns. The light caressed everything like a delicate and expert hand, and when the sun was about to set, a last ray struck the cut glass on the chandelier--a chandelier so small it was almost a toy--and made it glitter ^{with} ~~in~~ all the colors of the rainbow.

How long did I wait in that room, contemplating its details and lost in my musings? How cozy I felt! It had such good exposure (all three windows faced due south) that you hardly noticed the chill of that Barcelona⁹ December. The fireplace was cold, so was the coal stove, but ^{the room} the sun had been warming ~~it~~ all day and you forgot that winter was right outside. What a contrast with the room where I'd slept in that residence, so glacial, so drab with its twenty identical iron bedsteads and its interminable walls . . .

#

At that moment, Trini entered.

Now that I know she was to mark me for life, I try to recall my first impression, but strange as it may seem, I don't remember anything that spectacular. The woman standing before me corresponded to none of the images suggested by her letters. She was a girl of twenty-one or twenty-two (I'd had my twentieth birthday a few months before), tall and slender, with very pale eyes and a determined expression that disconcerted me. Lluís had already written to her, explaining the purpose of my visit, and she didn't seem very eager to talk. I committed the error, as I later realized, of suggesting straight off that understanding and indulgence are essential between man and wife. I'd meant for her to interpret this in a general sense, not as a reference to her situation--which at the time I knew about only from her letters. The clumsiness with which I broached the subject led her to take it as an attempt to interfere in her affairs, to get her to make up with Lluís. I tried to explain myself. She cut me off

and told the maid to serve tea.

X "I should warn you that you'll have to drink it without sugar. I can't even remember what sugar tastes like. On the other hand, you can buy all the tea you want, since no one drinks it in Barcelona. It was Soleràs who introduced us to it. He'd ~~lived~~ ^{traveled} abroad, and it's something that, once you get used to it, you can't do without. What a pity one can't live on tea alone! Today, to get ten pounds of dry, wormy marrowfats . . ."

#

I tried to bring the conversation around to that trip we had to organize in the next two days. She kept interrupting me.

"They were expensive too: yellow marrowfats as big as horses' teeth. You could see the worms wiggling around at the bottoms of the holes. Maybe we aren't as hard-up as we think in Barcelona. In a real famine, we'd be delighted to find worms in our marrowfats. Protein!"

I kept trying to get her to say whether she and her son would join our expedition. She cut me off again.

"I know from Lluís's letter that you were studying to be a priest, so I'll speak to you as frankly as I would to a confessor. Moreover, I assume that it was in this capacity that you allowed yourself to give me that edifying advice. Unfortunately, I'm in no mood to take it. For me, Lluís is finished. It would take too long to explain why, but you should realize that's how it is. I beg you, therefore, to drop the subject."

The cool tone in which she uttered these words pained me. I would have preferred a tearful scene, though other people's tears always embarrass me.

"You're a Christian," I said.

"How do you know that?"

How? From her letters, of course. It was then that I first felt, in a

wave of shame, that I had no excuse for reading them. I blushed. She looked at me curiously.

"What's going on here? Even Lluís doesn't know, so he couldn't have told you."

I looked down.

"Why don't you tell me the truth?"

"The truth . . ." I stammered, without raising my eyes.

"Yes, the truth: it was Soleràs who told you. You and he talked about it."

"She doesn't know Soleràs gave that bundle of letters to Lluís," I thought, trying to pull my ideas together. "Otherwise, she wouldn't think Lluís doesn't know she's a Christian."

"Soleràs could have spoken to me about you," I replied evasively. "He could have told me, before he disappeared from our brigade, that you'd told him about your conversion. He could have even told me you were baptized. I could have found all this out from Soleràs."

"God Almighty, I'm so hungry!" she exclaimed as if she had scarcely paid attention to the words I'd had so much trouble getting out. "Would you like some chartreuse? There's plenty of that. It's too bad those marrowfats take so long to cook; we could each eat a huge bowlful while we're chatting. Would you like to know what I was doing while you were waiting for me? I'd heard that an Algerian barge had managed to sneak past the fascist torpedo boats and slip into port last night. They said it was loaded with white beans. White beans! Are there still such things on earth? Well, yes, they still exist, but you have to look sharp to get them. I didn't get there in time. The white beans were all gone. All they had was worm-eaten marrowfats. I'm not complaining. Some people were even less lucky. By the time they got there, even the marrowfats were gone. I

brought them home on my back, like Santa Claus with his sack. Nowadays no one even looks at you. We've gotten over that kind of nonsense. Everyone's got his hands full just trying to stay alive. There was an alarm, the sirens sounded. I had to go down into a subway entrance and sit on those filthy, crowded steps, clutching my sack. My God, if someone had stolen it after all that trouble! They'll rob you blind during air raids. Still, it wasn't so bad down there. Blasts of hot air smelling of tar came out of the tunnel and kept us warm. I've always liked the smell of tar. And the feeling of belonging to a herd, of sharing the same dangers, the same hunger, the same cold, the same filth with thousands of strangers . . . makes you feel less alone. Everything depends on not being the only poor devil."

"No one's a poor devil unless he wants to be," I replied absentmindedly while I poured myself another glass of chartreuse. I'd have to try and break the ice.

"Allow me to be totally frank. I don't think you've understood the situation. You're attributing a ridiculous amount of importance to a trivial adventure. You, who are so intelligent, should be more understanding."

"Lluís is even more intelligent, or at least that's what he thinks. Shouldn't he be even more understanding--I mean if things were the other way around? Let's suppose--and this is just a simple hypothesis--that, taking advantage of the fact that he's far away and never thinks of me, I'd had a little fun with some feudal lord here in the rear. Or does he think such people don't exist? That there are no feudal lords left in Barcelona? Oof, we've got tons of them! What does he think my brother Llibert is? And there are plenty of others. With the excuse that they're emancipating the proletariat, they've emancipated themselves. And how! If we started in on this subject we'd never stop talking. But let's get back

to the matter at hand. Some things, once they're broken, can never be fixed. And besides, it's so boring to talk about it!"

I felt defeated.

"So we'll have to make the trip without you? You'll be the only one . . ."

"O no! You misunderstood me. I wouldn't miss a chance for my son to enjoy a little peace and some good meals! At the front, far from bombs and food shortages . . ." And she started laughing. "It's amazing! I'm about to go on vacation from the university. Everything fits perfectly! You had a brilliant idea!"

III

X ^{strung}
With Trini's and Mrs. Picó's arrival, Don Andalecio's house had undergone a radical transformation. Each one had put her ideas into practice, and incredibly enough, there had been no friction between them. Now, for example--and this was Mrs. Picó's doing--there was a clothesline stretched across the dining room with underclothes hung up to dry by the fire. The day after her arrival, she'd tried to hang her washing outside. It was so cold that the clothes had frozen instantly in her hands, "stiff as boards," she said.

X ^{drying}
Now the smell of clean underclothes ~~warming~~ by the fire was part of the house's atmosphere. Moreover, Trini had discovered a sack of lime in one of the abandoned houses and, helped by Mrs. Picó, the two orderlies, and a few other soldiers, she'd whitewashed the walls. When she'd finished, she filled the dining room with furniture she'd also found in abandoned houses, furniture she'd polished and polished till the old walnut shone. That room was no longer blackened and empty except for a table and three benches with hard backs, which was how we'd known it before. Now it was cozy and comfortable. We spent long December nights enjoying the ^{glow} ~~glow~~ from the fire, along with four or five oil lamps placed on various pieces of furniture. Rows of copper chocolate pots--we found one in every house--gleamed on the mantel. Presiding over one of the walls, which were now bright white, we even had a big old painting, dark and baroque, depicting an elderly anchorite: San Onofrio, according to big Roman letters on the frame. He was the sole surviving saint from that village's parish church, which had been burnt to the ground.

J
Trini remembered the ex-doorman, though he had only a vague recollection of her--as was natural, since there are few doormen and many

X students at the university. He was delighted to hear she was now a professor and felt honored to have her as a guest in his "fief at Santa Espina," as he put it. As soon as the women had arrived, he hurried to show Trini his latest discovery: a seventeenth-century treatise on agriculture, in Catalan, that had appeared in a ~~chest~~^{trunk} in an attic in one of the villages scattered around that abandoned valley.

X As far as Ramonet was concerned, the cold, crisp air and plenty of ~~nutritious food~~^{healthy} food quickly put some color in his face. Every morning, if the sun was shining, his father took him for a ride in the cabriolet. They followed the dirt road along the river till they were halfway to Parral. Sometimes Trini and I went with them. On the first few days, the boy's eyes opened wide in amazement at the sight of those frozen waterfalls. He'd just turned four.

X I divided my days between Villar and Santa Espina. In Villar, the major's wife killed time knitting sweaters for her husband. I've never known anyone with so many sweaters, all knitted by his wife. It was odd how much they resembled each other: the same dark olive complexion, the same vivacious black eyes. Their daughter was surprisingly serious, more than was appropriate for a girl of eight or nine. She seemed traumatized by all the horrors she'd heard about ever since the war had begun and was still hearing about--seventeen months, a very long time for her. She could barely remember what life had been like before. In spite of this, she was a sweet-natured, docile girl, but sometimes she did very odd things. One morning in Barcelona--it was her mother who told me about it--she'd slipped out of ~~her~~^{their} apartment on Cervelló Street, stationed herself at one of the entrances to the Boqueria Market, and started asking passersby for money. "I'm an orphan," she told them. "Some bad men killed my father and mother and now my stepmother beats me." An event that surprised

everyone, especially her parents, made me suddenly feel a special kinship with her. In Villar, the soldiers making the rounds found her between one and two in the morning in her nightgown in the middle of the street. She was walking very stiffly, unaware of the cold, with her eyes half shut. She had a painful shock when they shook her to find out what was the matter. "A sleepwalker" was Doctor Puig's diagnosis. "Now there are two of you in the brigade." He gave her some ordinary vitamin pills and, in response to her parents' anxious questions, he replied, "Don't attach the slightest importance to it. Look at Cruells here, chubby as a badger." The fact that she also suffered from these strange fits made me feel toward her as I would toward a younger sister, and she also suddenly felt closer to me. Whenever I returned to Villar from Santa Espina, she'd run up and give me a hug, and often she'd ask the same question that had surprised me when I'd visited her house, "They won't kill my daddy, will they?"

At mealtimes in Villar, all six of us would gather around the table: the major and his wife, the doctor and his, Marieta, and myself, as though we were one family. The major had made the rectory his headquarters, and the dining room was big. Before the war, it had also apparently been the parish office, and the priest had had someone paint big letters on the wall: Cursing Forbidden. The anarchists had crossed out "forbidden" and written "allowed" above it. Captain Picó, on his first visit to Villar, had asked the major in the name of culture to restore the original wording. But no matter how often he repeated his request, it fell on deaf ears. The room was heated by a big iron stove. There was a broken grandfather clock, and naturally it was Picó who managed to get it working again after spending a whole morning fiddling around with screwdrivers and pliers. It was a joy to hear it chime like a carillon. We felt that a little bit of peacetime had returned. By the stove, listening to the grandfather

clock's ticktock, the major's wife spent hours and hours knitting sweaters, seated in a rocking chair that must have belonged to the priest's housekeeper in former times.

X Marieta invariably refused to touch her food at lunchtime. We had to cook her an omelette, which was the only thing she'd eat. Her lack of appetite worried her mother a lot, so you can imagine her amazement when she found out that one day the girl had showed up at the soldiers' kitchen as soon as the bugle had summoned them. "My parents starve me," and she'd wolfed down three bowls of mess. Ever since I'd brought her a frog grown sluggish ^{from} ~~with~~ the cold and showed her that if she left it by the stove it'd wake up and start hopping around, Marieta would explore the river banks searching for frogs hidden under piles of dead leaves. Once she'd woken them up with the heat, she'd tenderly mother them and play with them as if they were dolls. She'd talk to them as to a baby, make them bowls of soup, and feed them from a bottle, which of course they refused. Afterward she'd forget about them, and the frogs would end up accidentally stepped on and squashed in some corner of the house.

X As far as the major and Doctor Puig were concerned, ever since their wives had arrived they'd abstained from ^{drinking hard liquor.} ~~alcoholic beverages~~. They'd taken a solemn vow the day before the women had come. The two of them had gone with Lluís and Picó, whom they'd "summoned as witnesses," to solemnly throw a bottle of rum, "a symbolic bottle," into a hole in the ice ⁱⁿ ~~on~~ the river. From then on, there was to be nothing but ^{if} ~~table~~ wine in Villar, and even that was to be stored in the cabinet in the parish office (where we kept food). The major collected all the casks and barrels in ^{if} ~~all~~ the village cellars, locked them in the sacristy, and gave the key to his wife. Every drop of liquor in town was now accounted for. With perfect justification, Doctor Puig could say someday future generations would find

out that they'd known "how to die of thirst like real men."

The first-aid station and medicines were in a basement room in the rectory. My superior and I would meet there every day at fixed times to treat whatever soldiers showed up. Hardly any showed up, however, so most days we whiled away the hours chatting around a stove we'd installed. Since we had almost nothing to do--the battalion had been reduced to a fifth of its former strength, the crisp air and good food kept the soldiers in excellent shape, and in those deserted villages they couldn't get any of the classic venereal diseases--Doctor Puig began to confide in me: "intimate secrets," as he put it, that generally had to do with his troubled married life. At first, since he was faithful to his "solemn vow," he limited himself to letting off a little steam by describing his father-in-law, a very rich pork butcher--the richest at the Boqueria Market--whose only daughter was Merceditas. I said there was nothing shameful about being a pork butcher's daughter. "But can't you understand?" he exclaimed. "Don't you see? She has nothing to be ashamed of! It's you and I who are good for nothing!"

X But alas, he didn't ~~keep faith~~ ^{stick to it} with his "solemn vow" for long. One day when I went down to the first-aid station, I surprised him taking a swig out of a bottle. He hadn't heard my footsteps. Taking advantage of the darkness, he tried to hide it among the medicines, but I'd seen that it was a bottle of Fundador, the famous Andalusian cognac, which caught my eye because it had been completely unavailable in the republican area since shortly after the war began.

"Yes, it's genuine Fundador," he said, half embarrassed and half jubilant. "I was literally dying of thirst, Cruells! A few days ago, Lluís showed up with a bottle of cologne. You can imagine it wasn't for me. So I asked Picó, 'Since Lluís finds cologne in no man's land, couldn't you find

me a little Fundador?' To give drink to the thirsty is an act of charity!

X What a lucky break! Picó brought it back from no man's land. I know it's fascist cognac, but I don't give a damn! Real pals are the ones who remember you when you're in ~~a bad way~~ ^{trouble}, don't you agree? Well, Picó's one of them. He remembered me, whereas Lluís only remembered my wife. Poor Lluís, if you only knew how earnestly he tries to please her. It's when you're down on your luck that you find out who your true buddies are, when you're really down in the dumps and a friend brings you a bottle of good cognac instead of chasing after your wife."

He was more euphoric than usual. I could see he'd had time to drink before I'd gotten there.

"I know it's fascist, but so is she! She'd like me to desert to the other side . . ."

"Like my aunt!" I innocently exclaimed.

X "Exactly like your aunt! They're all the same, and Merceditas is one of them! She's the kind that, when she walks down the street, makes college students yell, 'Hey, good-looking!' A fascist, just like your aunt. I ought to have her shot, but Lluís wouldn't like that."

He sighed. "Don't you think it's funny how Lluís and Picó find so much weird stuff in no man's land? When I think how earnestly Lluís . . . hmm . . . when I think that half the human race . . . You want to know what I really think? Everyone in this brigade used to bad-mouth Soleràs, but he was the one who put his finger on it. An asshole, agreed, but he put his finger on it. Since he disappeared, this brigade hasn't been worth a damn. Soleràs used to say, 'Everyone's got the horns he deserves, with honorable exceptions.' Well, I'm an honorable exception. Merceditas has never cuckolded me. Quite the contrary! To cuckold me, she'd have to make another man happy, and she'd rather die than do that!"

X From then on, he often drank in that basement room. At lunchtime he managed to control himself and keep his wife from realizing he'd had a few too many. Besides, she was rather inclined to pay no attention to anything outside herself. There are other women of ^{her} ~~that~~ sort. When they're very good-looking, and this was the case with Mrs. Puig, their stupidity is dazzling; just as a millionaire's stupidity seems underlined by his millions. Apart from that, she was a good woman. She only lived for herself, but herself included her family. If she hadn't been so attractive, so blond, so well built, we would have just said "She's a good woman." Because basically, that's what she was. Her husband made fun of her but was also scared of her. Often he'd say things deliberately to make her mad. One day we went to Santa Espina to treat a soldier with a dislocated foot. When we'd gotten back to Villar and were having lunch, he started praising Picó's wife to the skies, "What an adorable woman! She was so charming, helping us snap those bones back into place, without anesthesia, you know," and he looked at Merceditas, "because we'd forgotten to take any along. She was the one who kept that soldier's spirits up. She could turn a steer into a bull! Dark and passionate, hmm!"

"And you, darling," she replied--she was in the habit of calling him "darling" all the time--"are an ass and, what's worse, you don't have any manners."

When we were down in the basement again, he said, "You heard her, Cruells. An ass! Is that why I pored over pathology and anatomy: so a birdbrained broad could call me an ass? Ah, Cruells, if you only knew! Ah, Cruells! I adore that birdbrain! Yes; I adore her. That's the worst part: I adore her. Ah Cruells, Cruells, if only you knew! You don't know, but I'll tell you. I'll tell you an 'intimate secret.'"

He very mysteriously went and shut the basement door, and after

sitting quietly for a while like someone pondering his confession, he opened his heart to me in the following fashion, "Merceditas is one of those broads who knock men off their feet. Especially teenagers, hmm, teenagers! Teenagers stare at her like a starving man in front of a pastry shop window. They look her up and down, you know, those goddamned teenagers! Right in the middle of the sidewalk and without the slightest regard for my humble person."

"That's not her fault," I ventured.

"Her? Her father is the richest pork butcher in the whole Boqueria Market! King Bacon! Every year, the pork butchers' association used to hold a dance. A ton of silk and diamonds! The men in tuxedos, the women in evening gowns. They named a panel to choose their 'princess,' and I was the secretary. The head of it was Josep Maria de Segarra, who never missed a beauty contest. He judged them all! On that occasion, we didn't have to worry about votes and finalists because we all agreed right from the start. We were wild about Merceditas! Amid great waves of applause, Segarra proclaimed her Princess of the Pork Butchers' Association of Barcelona. Miss Bacon!"

I again ventured to come to Mrs. Puig's defense.

"You say qualities? Of course she's got qualities! Who doesn't? She's certainly got qualities. She's got a rump like a Renaissance popess"--and repeating "a rump like a popess," an expression that surprised me, he made a broad, circular gesture with his hands. "A rump like a popess, ~~yes~~ is that what you call 'qualities'? Yes, I can't deny it. She definitely has qualities. For example, she has, if you only knew, a birthmark . . . hot and spicy as a peppercorn . . . oof, qualities . . ."

I tried to stem that flood of "intimate secrets," which were beginning to get out of hand, but he suddenly got mad.

"Aren't you my subordinate here? Can't a man get a load off his chest with his subordinates in this damned brigade? Can't one talk about anything in this brigade?"

After this scene, the first time I went to Santa Espina I asked Picó not to give the doctor any more bottles of cognac. He glanced at me slyly.

"But he insists," he said, "and I'm at his mercy. I can't do without him."

I had no idea that Doctor Puig was treating him. Hadn't he sworn up and down at one time that he'd have all his gunners open fire on Doctor Puig before letting him lay a hand on him? I had no idea. And besides, he took me by surprise and I didn't reply because I was afraid of putting my foot in it, since you never know. I vaguely recalled that Picó, in former times, whenever he'd told us about his years as a legionnaire in North Africa, had declared in sibyline terms that "some of those girls down in Morocco give you something to remember them by." In any case, Doctor Puig had never breathed a word of it to me. One afternoon I'd been alone in that basement, tidying up our supplies. In the biggest cabinet, whose contents I was arranging, I found a little bottle I'd never seen before. The label said: Polierotikol. The next day I showed it to the doctor.

"You finally found it," he said, "and yet I'd hidden it as well as I could. I've got ideas, you know, ideas! Like Renaissance popes. Yes, Cruells, don't make that face like a Jesuit. You're not going to try and convince me that there were no popes in the Renaissance!"

"I don't know much about it," I replied, "but it seems to me you shouldn't resort to sexual stimulants. They say they're bad for your health. I've always heard that cantharides"--I'd seen the ingredients on the label-- "are very dangerous."

"Me? As far as I'm concerned! When you're young at heart you don't

need that stuff! It's Picó who needs it, but don't tell anyone I told you. A professional secret! He found it in no man's land. It's incredible what he finds there! When you got that bright idea of having the women come, Picó started worrying. 'You have to realize, doctor,' he told me, 'that I'm more than twenty years older than my wife and it's been a year and a half since I've had any practice. I'm out of shape!' He was afraid of making a fool of himself. You never know with guys who've been in the foreign legion; they all have bad prostates. They've all had 'love troubles,' as Picó puts it. So to make a long story short, he asked me for something that would discreetly help him acquit himself honorably. In a case like this, when a man's honor's at stake, there's nothing like Polierotikol: a classic cure that's stood the test of time. The problem is that there's not a drop of it left in republican territory. 'Don't worry about that, doctor,' Picó said. 'I'll find plenty of it in no man's land.' It's astonishing what he and Lluís manage to find there! But Picó would have drunk it down in one gulp! He'd have puffed up like a bullfrog! That's why I keep it here and dole it out to him in 'small dioceses,' as he puts it. He's delighted; according to him, he feels strong as an ox."

X Shortly after this conversation, it occurred to Major Rosich that Saint Lucy's day was coming up (in reality her day, the thirteenth of December, had passed) and that Saint Lucy was the patroness of infantrymen. We tried to show him that he'd made a double mistake; that the patroness of infantrymen, as far as we could remember, had always been the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception, whose day is the eighth of December, not the thirteenth, and that besides, it was already December sixteenth. It was all a waste of time. He wanted to throw a "gala luncheon" in Villar "in honor of our holy patroness," and by God, that's what he was going to do! At least everyone agreed on one point: that

Saint Lucy, whether or not she was our patroness and whatever her day might have been, was one of the saints who most deserved to be toasted. Now, when I recall those events blurred by time, I'm shocked by their grotesqueness in the midst of one of the most atrocious wars ever fought (the battle of Teruel, in which thousands of soldiers would die of gangrene and frostbite, was about to begin or perhaps had already begun). But we were on a "^{stelle} ~~quiet~~ front," and for us that battle was as distant as if it were on the other side of the earth. I imagine all wars are like that: those who've lived through their horrors and know there's even worse to come go in for the silliest pranks when they have a little time off. We never talked about dead comrades, and there had been thousands of them since the beginning of the war. Anything that might depress us was taboo, the same as those sublime patriotic and revolutionary songs only sung by draft dodgers in the rear, though the political commissars had tried to shove them down our throats at the front. Those songs seemed unbearably corny to us.

Now, when I think that shortly after ^{our} ~~the~~ "gala luncheon" we started seeing fleets of bombers flying overhead on their way to and from Teruel, now that we know what a frozen horror that battle in the ^{middle} ~~midst~~ of the Aragonese winter was . . . but I should describe ^{our} ~~that~~ "gala luncheon" as it was and not as it should have been--if indeed it could have been any other way.

In addition to the six people who normally ate together in Villar, the major invited Captain Picó, Lluís, their wives, and Ramonet. The major had a soldier on his staff who was a calligrapher and who hand-lettered the eleven menus in Gothic script that we found at our places: "Cabbageless partridges, jugged hare, wines from our own estates . . ." To appreciate the bit about the partridges, one had to know that a while back a humor

magazine had printed a joke in which a man walks into a bar and orders a vermouth without olives. "It'll have to be without anchovies," the barman replies, "because we're out of olives." This joke had been a huge success in Barcelona, where at that time it was impossible to get food, but apparently Mrs. Picó had never heard it since she asked in a puzzled tone why the menu specified "cabbageless partridges."

"They had to be cabbageless," the major kindly explained. "We'd have cooked them without truffles but . . ."

"We're out of them," the doctor wearily added.

"Wines from our own estates," of course, meant the ones we'd found in the village cellars and that had been locked up in the sacristy. For that "gala luncheon" they'd set up a big table covered with a linen tablecloth brought from no man's land. All together, it was quite elegant. They'd wanted to impress Mrs. Puig, force her to admit that our brigade had class, that we were all as refined and genteel as could be. Everyone tried to remember his "manners," "manners" from before the war, all to make her see we weren't like the flatfeet but real men of the world with all the savoir-faire she could ask for.

In order to do everything by the book, we separated the married couples at the table. The lunch began very well amid animated conversation.

"Despite everything, madam," the major said to Mrs. Puig, who was seated between him and Lluís, "we're not nearly as uncouth as the fascists claim. Of course the fascists would be quite right if they were referring to the Flatfoot Brigade. Ah, Mrs. Puig: if you had to dine with their officers, you'd be appalled."

"Before the war," muttered Doctor Puig, who was seated beside Mrs. Picó, "I had my shoes shined every Saturday. But now . . ."

He raised his leg to show her his worn-out officer's boot. Even Mrs. Picó was on her best behavior, glancing out of the corner of her eye to see how the others ate their partridges without touching them with their fingers. Picó was telling Mrs. Rosich one of his yarns.

"Indubitably," said the major, leaning toward Mrs. Puig, "our brigade has class, unlike those flatfeet. You hear what Captain Picó is telling my wife? Nothing you couldn't tell a nun. We're remarkably well-bred in this brigade."

Mrs. Puig generously acknowledged that the "banquet"--and she said it in French--"ne manquait pas de tenue." As I've said, Lluís was on the other side of her, and it was him she tried to engage in conversation. But Lluís was rather taciturn. After the partridge, they served white wine.

"Since we have no fish," the major explained, still addressing Mrs. Puig, "we'll have to drink white wine after the partridge course. I'm sure you'll excuse us, madam, given the circumstances."

Trini barely took part in the conversation. They'd placed her beside me, but she was hardly there. From her distracted air and Lluís's silence I gathered that they'd had a quarrel just before our "gala luncheon." At that moment, the major decided it was time for his first toast.

"To our marvelous brigade!"

X The white wine seemed light but it went to ^{our} ~~your~~ head. The doctor was beginning to feel its effects. He'd already drunk three big glasses and now, imitating the major, he raised his fourth in a toast.

"To my father-in-law, who can't sneeze without coins falling out of all his pockets!"

"I assume, darling," his wife interrupted, "that you're not trying to make make a joke at daddy's expense."

"Daddy' is my father-in-law, as I'm sure you'll understand," the

doctor explained to Mrs. Picó as he sat down. "What I don't know, Mrs. Picó, is whether you've heard about what Letamendi did in his student days when the man he'd hoped would be his father-in-law told him to get lost. Letamendi was expecting it. He was a starving student, whereas the gentleman who displayed such reluctance to be his father-in-law was as loaded with dough as mine. But Letamendi was prepared. He was no slouch, the great Letamendi!"

At this point in the story, the cross-eyed orderly entered with the juggled hare. Once we'd finished it, they served red wine, and again the major apologized.

"We should have champagne after such an exquisite dish, but I beg you, Mrs. Puig, to use your imagination. With imagination, red wine can taste just like champagne. What champagne would you prefer? Veuve Cliquot? Nothing stops us from imagining we're drinking Veuve Cliquot."

Since "the champagne had been served," he felt obliged to offer another toast.

"The only 'veuve' here is Veuve Cliquot. And may it stay that way for many years!"

Getting more sentimental with every toast, he began staring at Ramonet and Marieta. The two kids sat facing each other, pelting each other with pieces of bread. Marieta, naturally, had refused to touch her partridge and hare. As usual, the cross-eyed orderly had ~~made~~ ^{fixed-cooked} her an omelette. Her father got up again, raising another glass of red wine.

"To the coming generation! Home-grown children!"

He emptied his glass and repeated, "Home-grown! But they're trying to turn them into orphans!" He poured another glass and repeated his toast. "To the coming generation! May they never be orphaned!"

It was one of his favorite expressions, "May we keep turning out out

home-grown children for many years to come!" but it sounded odd to Mrs. Puig and she asked Lluís what it meant. He shrugged his shoulders. "It's just his way of talking. They talk a lot of nonsense in this brigade." Picó, who was sitting at the head of the table, winked at him as if to say "Lluís, this is starting to get out of hand. The major's drunk as a lord." The doctor noticed.

"Calm yourselves, citizens! The danger has passed; it was a false alarm! Look: here comes cross-eyes, one the Catalan Army's most glorious heroes, bringing us our coffee. No barley tea, citizens! It was a false alarm! This is genuine coffee; no barley tea for us!"

"Found in no man's land," the major explained to Mrs. Puig.

"In no man's land," the doctor said, "they find fantastic ingots of pure coffee, inexhaustible coffee mines."

"Madam," said the major, "you'll have to excuse us once again. It's not real mocha. It's from Guinea, you know: fascist coffee. It's by no means the coffee that you deserve . . ."

"It's delicious," she replied. "We haven't had coffee like this in Barcelona since the beginning of the war." And she helped herself to a second cup.

"I'll have another too," her husband said, but instead of coffee he filled his cup with red wine.

"Darling, I'm sure you don't want red wine after your coffee."

X "Since it's not mocha . . ." he apologized. And turning to Mrs. Picó, he added, "The great Letamendi had a million ^{bright} brilliant ideas . . . Let them say what they like: Letamendi was a real character. When he went to ask for the girl's hand . . ."

"Darling," Merceditas interrupted him, "we weren't talking about Letamendi."

"But," Mrs. Picó said in surprise, "if your husband wants to tell an antidote . . ."

"She must mean an anecdote," Mrs. Puig condescendingly corrected her, turning to Lluís.

"An antidote: that's it! That's what I wanted to discuss. The great Letamendi's antidotes!" And he exclaimed, "Letamendi had some pair of antidotes!"

"You're making a fool of yourself, darling."

And he repeated even more vehemently, "A phenomenal pair of antidotes!"

This silly phrase had quite a future ahead of it, and from then on we were always talking about "antidotes" in our brigade. After a slight shrug of her shoulders, Merceditas lit a cigarette. Lluís had offered her a pack of Camels that he'd also found in no man's land.

"Goddamned no man's land," the doctor snarled. "You can see it's a regular forest of tobacco shops . . . huge cigar trees . . . There's something rotten here. Yes, rotten!"--he repeated, staring straight at his wife, as though defying her--"Can't I talk about anything in this brigade? They ought to make Roland Cuckolded required reading ^{at} in all Catholic girls' schools. Maybe then there wouldn't be so many dumb blondes in the world. What a terrific book, Roland Cuckolded! They've put horns on the hero by the time we reach the third page. That's the kind of book I like, one that doesn't waste your time with descriptions of landscapes. And when you get to chapter six, entitled 'Agonizing Doubts,' the plot's gotten so thick that poor Roland exclaims: 'By Jove, there's no two ways about it: I've cuckolded myself!' Because you should know, Mrs. Picó, that the woman he thought was another's ^{'s} wife turns out to be his own: family complications ~~that aren't~~ ^{not} worth going into. The ill-starred Roland had

married by proxy, sight unseen. He didn't know his wife was a real bombshell. I should mention that though the novel doesn't describe landscapes, as far as the girl is concerned . . . mmm . . . there's plenty of description . . . there's one chapter in particular, where she's getting dressed. Damn, that's my idea of great literature! No detail is omitted! As for drama, chapter eleven, entitled 'Dog Eat Dog' . . . That's when the plot gets so convoluted with the horns the two families have stuck on each other that unhappy Roland, raising his hands and eyes heavenward, exclaims: 'Has the world ever seen horns as enormous as mine?'

"How about quieting down for a while," his wife interrupted. "You don't even know what you're blathering on about."

X "I don't know? I don't know what I'm blathering on about? I know perfectly well! In the last chapter, number fifteen, entitled 'Peace Treaty ^{at} in Cape Horn,' Roland seems more resigned and comments, at the banquet they throw to celebrate: 'What a mixup, God Almighty, what a mixup! I was turning into my own father-in-law or at the very least my own brother-in-law! Not even Sherlock Holmes could have untangled this one!'"

And without any transition, he told Picó's wife, "If you want to make Merceditas mad, all you have to do is say 'streaky bacon' in front of her."

At that moment, his wife was chatting with Lluís and didn't hear him. The stove, jammed with wood, glowed red-hot. We were sweating.

"Daddy," Ramonet yelled, "why didn't you put me next to Marieta?"

"The child is quite right," the major's wife, who was sitting next to him, remarked approvingly. "He talks just like a little man."

"Would you like some more mocha?" the major asked Merceditas, who was helping herself to a third cup. "There's nothing like mocha. Perhaps you don't know where the word comes from. It's a city in Arabia, imagine!"

"I know perfectly well. That's where Napoleon is buried."

Doctor Puig started upon hearing his wife's comment and stared in puzzlement at the tip of his nose. But then he returned to his private chat with Mrs. Picó.

"This story about Letamendi that I was going to tell you is about love, you know, but in this brigade they won't let you open your mouth. I'll have to go tell it to the Flatfoot Brigade, where it would ^{enjoy} ~~have~~ the success it so richly deserves."

"If it's a love story . . ." said the captain's wife, looking at the doctor more intently. "I thought doctors never talked about love."

"Never talk about love, madam? Why, we scarcely talk of anything else!"

"There's nothing like education," Picó commented sententiously to the doctor's wife. ^u "I have a weak spot for Napoleon Bonaparte."

"We speak of love," the doctor continued, "in ^{all its} ~~all its~~ aspects: ^{theorie} ~~the~~ und praxis."

"It seems to me we're getting confused here," said the major.

"Napoleon Bonaparte? Mmmm . . . You mean that stiff buried in Mocha isn't . . . mmm . . . I'll be hanged if I can remember."

"Well, who else could it be?" asked Picó, lighting his pipe and glancing at him out of the corner of his eye.

"Let them argue," the doctor murmured to Mrs. Picó, "about whether Napoleon and Bonaparte were or were not the same person. It's one of history's darkest enigmas. What's undeniable is that Napoleon had a phenomenal pair of horns, remarkable in more than one respect. Back in my day, students used to sing a French ditty about Napoleon and Josephine. It's a pity I can't remember it because it was a very lively little number."

"Don't listen to this quack," the major cut in, leaning toward Mrs.

Picó from the other side. "All doctors are charlatans. I believe he'd be capable of deserting to the Flatfoot Brigade any day just for the pleasure of telling off-color ~~stories~~ ^{jokes}. I also know this ditty he sang in his youth, and I can assure you it's not appropriate for mixed company. I suppose you've noticed those letters painted on the wall: Cursing Allowed. I wanted to paint over "allowed" and write "forbidden" instead, but he, the doctor, was against it. He says we have to fight against ~~"refoulements"~~ ^{repressions} and I can tell you that at least in this area, he matches his words with deeds. He hasn't the faintest notion of ~~education or breeding~~ ^{education as good manners} ~~"good manners."~~ ^{good manners."}

At the word "education," Picó pricked up his ears. He looked at his wife and the major, who were deep in conversation, and suggested to Mrs. ~~Picó~~ ^{Rosich} in his most courtly tone, "Madam, perhaps we should apply the lex talionis to them."

He was very proud of knowing this expression, which he considered extremely learned and had found in the title of one of the novels in his suitcase. The major's wife nodded. She certainly had no idea what the lex talionis was, but everything sounded good to her, she always agreed with everyone, and in addition, after meals she usually felt drowsy. Normally she went upstairs for a little nap, but on that day, since it was a "gala luncheon," she didn't dare to leave and one could see she was making a great effort to stay awake. We'd reached the cognac stage, and the cross-eyed orderly was pouring genuine Fundador into our glasses. The major and doctor, using our glorious patroness as a pretext, drank glass after glass. The situation was getting worse by the moment.

"In my time," Doctor Puig began, "there was a funeral parlor next to a certain house we students frequented. Because back then they held real funerals, unlike now when they bury men like dogs. What good times

2X we had at that parlor! No, wait a minute; I've made a mistake. The good times weren't at the funeral parlor but at the house next door. It was a very well appointed house, a house 'comme il faut.' There was even a big photo of Angel Guimerà in a ^{gilt}~~gilded~~ frame in one of the rooms. A house of excellent repute, as you can see, and not far from the hospital where I was an intern. Very well situated, well known to all the students. Perhaps you're unaware that medical students sometimes swipe anatomical specimens for their practical jokes. Well, one time I took the leg off some poor devil who'd died of cancer and, without the slightest respect for Guimerà, I hid it in the bed in that room."

"Is this the kind of love story doctors tell?" asked Picó's wife, very disappointed.

"By no means. The love story is the one about Letamendi. He'd stolen--how shall I put it--certain things no gentleman would mention in front of ladies."

"By God, it's a pleasure to see how well bred we are in this brigade," the major interjected. "But anyhow, what exactly did Letamendi do?"

"Maybe he built tanks!" exclaimed Mrs. Picó, roaring with laughter. "'Build tanks, tanks, tanks!' Did you know there are thousands of posters in Barcelona that say just that. If I were as handy as my husband, I'd have gotten to work right away."

"It was when I saw that poster," Mrs. Rosich innocently added, "that I decided to knit a gray sweater for my husband."

"It wasn't sweaters but tanks you had to knit," the major scolded her, and then he immediately called over to the doctor, "Let's find out once and for all: did Letamendi make tanks or sweaters?"

"Letamendi, hmm"--and Doctor Puig poured himself another glass of cognac. "Letamendi had a pair of sweaters, a pair of tanks . . ."

"Yes, big as a bull's! We already know that!" the major interrupted impatiently. "What we want to hear about is what happened with his father-in-law."

"When that father-in-law, who was filthy rich, denied him his daughter's hand in marriage, Letamendi left a very nicely wrapped package on the table with a note saying 'Since I won't need these anymore . . .'"

The major and Picó laughed and laughed till tears streamed down their faces. It was this stupid, macabre joke that brought the conversation around to Soleràs. He'd disappeared from our brigade "without leaving a forwarding address," as our major put it. At the time we assumed he'd joined another republican brigade and some, given his extravagance, even suspected he was with the anarchists. The major, when he could control his laughter, exclaimed, "Look at this: to celebrate our patroness's day all we talk about is stiffs. Have we at least agreed on who's buried in Mecca?"

"Mecca?" asked the doctor.

"Yes, Mecca. Weren't we talking about Mecca?"

"I assure you that Letamendi's not buried in Mecca."

"Agreed," Picó added, "but we were talking about Bonaparte, not Letamendi."

"Now there's a stiff for you!" the major shouted. "He's as dead and buried as the celebrated Ase."

"The Death of Ase,'" Picó explained to Mrs. Rosich, "is a piece I can play on the trombone. Our band plays it too."

And to demonstrate his musical talents, of which he was justifiably proud, he puffed out his cheeks and started intoning "The Death of Ase," imitating a trombone.

"Oof," the major protested. "That's enough 'Death of Ase.' This Ase

always makes me think of Soleràs, not because of being an ass but because of being dead. You have to admit Soleràs looked like death warmed over . . ."

Trini looked up, surprised. She'd barely said a word during the entire meal. No one but me noticed that in those bright eyes, two shocked tears sparkled. That shocked look has stayed in my memory ever since. Now, many years later, I can still see those eyes, wide-open. The conversation continued, more and more disjointed. It was impossible to stop the major and the doctor in their ~~wild~~ ^{mad} rush toward intoxication. Mrs. Puig, absorbed in conversation with Lluís, puffed on her cigarette and ~~looked~~ ^{glanced} up at the ceiling with the expression of a resigned martyr.

"Yes, he likes to pretend he's more crass than he really is to upset me. Because he knows I'm hypersensitive."

"One can see that at a glance, madam," Lluís replied.

"Imagine, Lluís: I'm so hypersensitive that whenever I look at a full moon I feel like crying."

"No! The full moon?" Lluís exclaimed. "When I see it I burst out laughing."

"I'm surprised at you," said the doctor's wife, "because a person who's not affected by the full moon isn't truly sensitive. I'd have been so happy if my husband had taken me for walks in Barcelona's Gothic Quarter when there was a full moon . . ."

At this moment the voice of her insensitive husband, who was immersed in a heated argument with the major, cut through the general buzz of conversation like a clap of thunder.

"Soleràs was a jerk, agreed; but he got to the heart of the problem."

"What about perfidious Albion?" shouted the major. "I haven't heard anything about that for a while."

"Who is this lady?" Picó's wife asked the doctor.

"I'll tell you in song," he replied. And he began singing in his powerful baritone voice,

When the English fall in love

they write letters every month.

It's that it is

"Perhaps you're unaware, Mrs. Picó," the major said, "that you can't have bullfights in the rainy season because bulls have no fight in them when the sun's not shining. Well, in England it rains constantly. Imagine! A disaster! Once, at the beginning of the war, an MP from the Labor Party visited our trenches. He found fault with everything! The rifles badly oiled, the troops badly disciplined, the officers unshaven . . . It was Soleràs who put him in his place. 'Every nation has the climate it deserves,' he said."

Soleràs's quip delighted Mrs. Picó who, since she was short and dark, thought of herself as a "hot-blooded southerner." She wanted to learn that ditty by heart, and as she sang "When the English fall in love" she snapped her fingers, imitating castanets. Loud enough so everyone could hear him, the doctor shouted from the head of the table, "Picó, you never told me you had such a vivacious wife. And dark as a gypsy! Hmmm, that's what I call sex appeal."

"Are you trying to get fresh with me?" and Mrs. Picó suddenly got the giggles, while the captain smiled at the end of the table, flattered by the praise the doctor heaped upon his wife. Mrs. Puig could stand no more. She whispered to Lluís, "This is disgraceful. Did you hear that, Lluís? Get fresh with her . . ."

"Fresh!" the doctor exclaimed. "That reminds me of another antidote. Once there was a stiff in Mecca. Yes, Merceditas, don't screw up your face at me! Weren't we talking about Mecca?"

Mrs. Rosich, who could barely keep her eyes open, hadn't said anything for a while. She was far away, as if in a dream. From time to time she sat up with a start, trying to fight off her drowsiness, smiling vaguely and staring in the direction of whoever was speaking. Marieta and Ramonet were arguing.

"Mohammed's buried in Mecca," Marieta said.

Unfortunately, she said it so loudly that everyone heard her. An embarrassed silence fell. Mrs. Rosich, brusquely awakened by that awkward silence, sat up. She had the impression that her daughter had said something inappropriate.

"What do you know about it? You're too young to know about such things."

"It's in a book we're studying at school."

"The one I'm studying," Ramonet retorted, "says just the opposite."

"Just the opposite, mmm . . . The opposite of what?" the major growled.

"The opposite of cuckolded," the doctor interjected. "That'd be a fine kettle of fish, if books said just the opposite."

"Maybe Soleràs took off for Mecca," the major said.

"Soleràs in Mecca!" Doctor Puig exclaimed. "That's all we need!"

"It's a hypothesis," the major said, as though apologizing for having offered it.

"Who is this Soleràs they're always talking about?" Mrs. Puig asked Lluís.

"I often wonder that myself," he replied. "When you come right down to it, who is Soleràs? A hypothesis? A riddle? I'd give anything to find out."

"Soleràs, madam," the major declared, "is someone who disappears

without a trace. Phantasmagoria: that's it in a nutshell."

"Let's grant that Soleràs is nothing more than phantasmagoria," the doctor acknowledged, "but the cologne certain obsequious young lieutenants find in no man's land is an undeniable reality. Something's rotten in Denmark."

"In Denmark?" his wife asked in surprise. "What does Denmark have to do with Mecca?"

"And what does your rear end have to do with ember days?"

Merceditas blushed with indignation but managed to control herself. Lluís hurriedly lit her third Camel. "Thank you," she said in a trembling voice.

"Yes, Denmark," her husband continued, addressing the captain's wife. "In Denmark you can find anything, from bottles of Fundador and cologne to coffee beans and Camels. Absolutely anything! They find jars of Polierotikol this big. Apparently they grow all over the place in Denmark. Everything's rotten in Denmark."

"What they grow in Denmark, my dear quack," Picó interrupted calmly with a sly glance, "is bottles of 1902 sauterne for those unable to keep a professional secret. You'll never taste another drop of Fundador if you don't shut your trap."

At that moment, the major unbuttoned his jacket and shirt as though the heat were suffocating him. He rose to his feet, raised his hand for silence, and solemnly announced, "Officers, noncoms, and soldiers, heroes of Catalonia and the republic: I'm drunk as a lord!"

His wife rushed to his side. He was beating his breast.

"What's the matter? Are you sick?"

"As a lord!" and he burst into tears, embracing her. "I swore I wouldn't drink while you were here and now just look at me: drunk as a

lord . . ."

"It's only one day," she said, comforting him. "There's no shame in getting drunk at a gala luncheon like this. The patroness of infantrymen!"

X Husband and wife decided that the best thing would be to go upstairs and take a nap. Marieta and Ramonet were playing on the other side of the room from the stove, which was ~~stifling~~ *stiflingly hot.* With all these desertions, the conversation began to languish.

"You should be ashamed of yourself, darling," said Merceditas, looking at her husband. "And you wanted me to bring the children . . . What a bad example!"

X "You're quite right, madam," Picó said. "That ~~such~~ *I* men of such culture . . ."

"Who asked you, Picó? Who the hell asked you?" the doctor exclaimed. "Culture? Culture, you can shove it up your . . ."

"Darling, you ought to go sleep it off too."

"I don't feel like it! Culture, as far as I'm concerned . . . Can't you read? It's written up there in big letters: Cursing Allowed. You're all witnesses! A nap? Bah, all it takes is one injection. One injection and your hangover's cured!"

"One injection of what, darling?"

"Of streaky bacon, sweetheart."

Merceditas blanched. She flung away her cigarette and rose to her feet. Her husband calmly poured himself another glass of Fundador. She opened her mouth to say something, but then she closed it again and stormed out, slamming the door behind her.

"Now finally," he said, staring at the tip of his nose, "I can talk freely. Poor Letamendi, sent packing like that! It's a wonder my father-in-law didn't do the same with me, as loaded with dough as he is. Merceditas

conned him into it, you know? She'd just seen a movie about a poor doctor who saved a whole city from cholera, and she thought I was like that doctor. But without a penny, without cholera, without patients, how could I . . . And to think I joined the army in order to find a little peace!"

IV

And every life is a path of solitude.

Màrius Torres

Our brigade was idle, since we were still waiting for the arms and recruits we needed to reconstitute it. As we had nothing to do in my section, I spent more and more time in Santa Espina, where I often ~~spent~~ ^{slept} ~~the night.~~ ^{over.} In case of an emergency, Doctor Puig could always call me on the field telephone that linked the two villages. But there wasn't a single emergency.

When I ~~stayed over,~~ ^{spent the night} I'd sleep in that room up by the attic. It still contained three mattresses, but since the women had arrived I slept there by myself. That's where I kept the chalice Picó had found in no man's land. I said my evening prayers before that chalice, which I placed on a wobbly table I'd found. I prayed to the memory of what it once had contained. At those moments, I often thought of Doctor Gallifa. Having heard nothing further about him, not even knowing whether he was dead or alive, I sometimes found myself praying to him. It wasn't as though I were praying to a saint. It was more that I'd have conversations with him in my head, as if I were asking him for advice. Like a fool, I thought then that he would have approved of what I was trying to do. How ~~much~~ ^{badly I needed} I ~~could have used~~ his advice on that slippery slope! Doctor Gallifa, so far removed from everyday banalities, possessed a rare perspicacity when it came to crucial things. Beneath my apparently generous intentions, he'd have sensed the sinful inclination that moved me without my being aware of it. And it's not that Doctor Gallifa was a nit-picking confessor; quite the contrary. Right up to the war, I'd been burdened by bad dreams and had often asked God to stop my dreaming. I'd also tried to confess my

dreams to Doctor Gallifa. "Son," he interrupted me, "don't waste my time.

There are people waiting in line." He was, in fact, a very popular confessor and sometimes the line reached all the way to the church door.

X So I was left with my dream, as with a counterfeit coin no one ^{would} ~~will~~ take.

I couldn't pass it along to him.

And yet dreams are real. From the moment we have them, in one sense or another we carry them around inside us. Each person's dreams are a part of himself. What a strange, incoherent part, and yet they're a part of us. Their meaning eludes us. The Freudians' interpretations are so simplistic. Our dreams are much more varied and fantastic, more murderous at times, than anything that's been said about them. Their meaning eludes us, and nonetheless it seems strangely clear when we're actually dreaming. It's afterward that we don't understand them. Awake, we don't understand the sleepers we were a moment earlier. That's the source of the embarrassment a waking man feels about the sleeping man who was himself but also another, the embarrassment at not controlling this other part of himself, his dreams. "Dreams are a no man's land between life and death," Soleràs once told me, "between the obscene and the macabre."

2X What does it mean to be in love? A quarter of a century later, I still don't know. Perhaps my heart has never dared to ask itself. Could it perhaps be a desire to share the mystery and thus free oneself from it? The mystery of life and death, of the obscene and the macabre; a very vague desire, however ^{intense} ~~piercing~~ it may be. Yes, very vague. Perhaps it only becomes precise in the depths of our dreams, but then it flees when we wake up. In all this there's something not much clearer than those phenomena Soleràs spoke of one unforgettable night. ^B ~~o~~ Blessed are those who are like the birds of the air, who live and die without worrying about life and death. But I, tormented since childhood by bad dreams, by

sleepwalking, by scruples and worries . . . I, poor me . . . I would have liked to fly through the air in broad daylight! So much darkness asphyxiates us, Lord. We'd like to live simply, in broad daylight, in the open air, freely. We'd like to live as You said, like little children, satisfied with the world as it is, with things and people as they are, since You created them all. To accept everything as it is, as it comes to us, humble of spirit, in utter simplicity; to live in utter simplicity, but with her.

When a man and a woman love each other, a hut is a palace. This is an old secret. Don Juan knew it well enough, even though all he knew of love was its fleeting aspect; because our whole problem, O Lord, is this, is our fleetingness. If we could make certain moments that slip away eternal . . . the world would be marvelous . . . Because happiness cannot be found in things but only in love; and the spirit of acquisition comes from the emptiness we try to fill with things because we lack love. The spirit of acquisition is relative. One strives to obtain what others don't have, but love alone is absolute--including when it's fleeting, including when it's sinful, including when it's murderous, for in truth it's murderous to covet one's neighbor's wife. However brief it may have been, however wicked, however murderous, it was a taste of the absolute! Don Juan knew this well; and with him all those who have loved wisely or foolishly, for an instant or forever, blessedly or murderously but with all their hearts and souls.

X This breath of ^{the} ~~absoluteness~~ ^I is enough to transfigure life and death! This breath of love makes everything glorious. That blessed house in Nazareth must have been so humble; hardly more than a hut. Yet it's the house we think of when we imagine a happy home, our very idea of happiness! Those sunlit days in Galilee, the humble, hidden peace that enveloped Jesus, Joseph, and Mary . . . The story of Christ's passion would

lack its full meaning without the story of His childhood. Often it's seemed like a string of fairy tales, hardly believable in the light of critical reason. But can critical reason ever understand love? The horror of the crucifixion would have no meaning if it weren't the same Jesus of Galilee, the same love, the same poetry. The Gospels teach us to accept the cross when our time comes, but don't they also teach us to accept happiness? Wasn't this our great crime: to reject happiness and poetry, to nail them to the cross? Happiness is sacred; it's what the Almighty wants for man. To reject it is terrible.

Yet despite everything, we'll all be crucified. Every life must inevitably end in death.

We'll all be crucified, but hush! Don't let the children hear you. Instead speak to them of mankind's wonderful future. And why should mankind's future be so wonderful? Poor mankind, how can it ever have a future? It must always live in the present, an atrocious present, always torn between two calls: happiness and crucifixion.

The call of crucifixion . . . is war anything but this? Of course they brandish excuses: noble causes, big words--and how empty, incomprehensible, and even ridiculous they seem to later generations! Can we understand why our great-grandfathers fought over the Bourbons' male and female lines of succession? Now it seems comical, but our great-grandfathers killed for it. Our great-grandchildren will laugh when they find out we killed each other over the proletariat and the bourgeoisie or the Aryans and the Jews, yet Hitler's and Stalin's concentration camps were created in the name of these empty, silly words. Silly words, empty pedantry, but the angry masses follow. Point to a scapegoat and they'll follow you. The aristocrat, the bourgeois, the priest, the Jew, the fascist, the Red: it makes no difference. Since he's the villain, it's his fault.

What's his fault? Everything. Death to the bourgeois, the priest, the Jew, the fascist, the Red! Hurrah for death! Burn, kill, gorge yourself on blood: "qu'un sang impur abreuve vos sillons." Always the same butchery.

One day when she and I were alone in Santa Espina, I asked her why she thought all those people, so varied, had gone to war: Lluís, Picó, Soleràs, the major, the doctor, all of them, on our side and the other, "Reds" and "fascists." She replied, as though surprised that I would even ask the question, "I suppose it must be for the cause." "The cause!" I exclaimed. "In any case, the cause would be different for each one . . . but what is each person's cause? No, no; it's not for any cause. They've come to be crucified. All of them, on both sides. It's the same story in every war, and that's why there will always, always be wars. Because man, who was created to sit by the fire with the woman he loves, nonetheless longs to be crucified. If you could have ^{see} ~~seen~~ all those fools, those drunks, those idiots at our 'gala luncheon'! You can't imagine what suffering they can feel and inflict when the time comes! Yet they march forward and are cut down, one after the other, and they still advance."

What drives them? Not the "cause," since no one knows what it is, but glory, which everyone longs for. But what glory, my God, if no one will ever know the names of all those soldiers killed in battle? Posterity? That's stupid. If posterity had to recall all those who have died in so many wars, all those who have written on sand . . . Even their closest comrades forget them after a while, sometimes within a few weeks. There are so many of them! So they're seeking a glory that mankind can't give, but what they really seek is crucifixion. War has no other meaning, but this meaning is so vast! No sacrifice is wasted, no matter who wins or loses. "Take up your cross and follow me;" they've taken it and followed Him without realizing it, perhaps without believing in Him or thinking they

don't believe in Him, sometimes even cursing His name.

All the mysteries of life and death are resolved in Christ's crucifixion! It doesn't matter if it's requited, if it's unappreciated; solitude makes no difference if one loves. What idiot spoke of hopeless loves? Where there's love there's hope; where there's hope there's faith! How many who thought they didn't believe will be saved by love, how many will be saved by hope . . . But Soleràs, who saw so clearly, was sorely mistaken. Perhaps without realizing it, at times he strayed into illuminism, the most repulsive of heresies, or into a pessimism that barely preserved the slightest vestiges of hope in the supernatural. Of course he saw it all clearly, but at other times . . . Those most to be pitied are always the victors, whoever they may be.¹¹ I pity with all my heart those who will find themselves with a victory on their hands,¹¹ he often said. As far as the vanquished are concerned, the vanquished of all centuries and all causes have been redeemed by their very defeat. They thirsted after glory--for this and nothing else is what drives men to seek crucifixion--after everything great, heroic, and absolute. They wrote on sand and centuries of winds have obliterated their words. They have vanished from men's memories, as though they'd never existed, but all sins but blasphemy against the Spirit will be forgiven, and doesn't any man who seeks crucifixion for a cause he deems just proclaim the Spirit? No one risks his life without believing in something worth dying for, and this something can be nothing other than the Spirit.

He wrote on sand and was crucified. And you, vanquished soldier, whoever you may be, need only raise your eyes heavenward to see Him as we saw Him in those final days, the nightmarish days of our final disaster, when entire armies, pulverized by artillery, tanks, and bombs, set out on endless ~~marches~~^{trunks} leaving behind trails of the dead, the dying, the sick, and

those too exhausted to continue. Often at dusk, on some distant summit, among the outlines of soldiers bent beneath submachine guns, I thought I saw His silhouette against the evening sky. Also bent beneath a weight, that of His cross, he marched ahead of us, vanquished among the vanquished, as though showing us the way to failure, ready to share all grief, defeat, and shame. He dragged His bare, bloody feet, and I'm by no means the only one who saw Him in those days. How many eyes opened then to the sight of Him! How could I ever forget the moment when, having reached the top of the Pyrenees and looking down on that vast plain dotted with smoking towns and villages, as a farewell to the crucified nation we were about to abandon, we sang Verdaguer's hymn to the Virgin Mary! Everyone, even the anarchists, for in those last days we were all mixed up together in the indescribable chaos of that supreme rout.

Yes, Soleràs saw things clearly, but he lost sight of the fact that an ideal persists even in triumph, however grotesquely it may be caricatured. Had we won, we would now feel the shame of so many other ill-fated victors. But our ideals would persist just as theirs have. A violin's strings are made of catgut, but Bach exists. Love exists and is as immense as the "Grosse Fuge" despite the wretchedness of our means. And God Himself? Did He appear among us as a young victor, resplendent in His glory? Gentlemen, please . . . It was also Soleràs, naturally--always Soleràs!--who got to the heart of it that night. "We don't have a clear idea of what a crucifixion was like," he said, and added "It's as unbearable to see God in His glory as in His shame."

#

I kept quiet and listened in the darkness, curled up on my mattress. He was talking about Constantine, who abolished crucifixions and replaced

X them with the gallows. "If he'd done it out of pity, to spare ~~these~~ ^{the} condemned such a long agony, he would deserve our eternal gratitude, but he did it so criminals wouldn't die like Him. Like Christ, who had wanted to die like a criminal! Did you know, Cruells, that during the first four centuries Christians avoided representing Christ crucified? They knew too well what it meant. It was only long after Constantine, when everyone had forgotten, that the first crucifixes appeared. They didn't give much of an idea . . ."

I listened, open-mouthed, unable to halt that flood of outrages that so upset me. "Those sentenced were stripped naked. Only a cretin could imagine that those executioners had a sense of modesty! There was nothing resembling a wooden base on the crucifixes. Their feet were nailed right to the stake, so they had to bend their knees and push their thighs apart . . ."

"Stop," I said. "I can't stand any more."

"Neither can I. No one can stand to imagine the cross. So you see, poor Cruells, what we did to our Creator once we had Him in our power . . ."

X But Soleràs erred when he refused to ~~acknowledge~~ ^{humbly accept} the wretchedness of our means. However wretched we may be, life is immense! If it's cowardly to spurn crucifixion when God calls us to it, it's criminal to spurn happiness when God wants us to be happy. Soleràs spurned it; he fled from it. He couldn't take his eyes off the obscene and the macabre, as though they'd put a spell on him; he, who knew better than many that God had taken on all our shame. Isn't this Christianity? This absurdity, the madness of the Cross? Christianity is strange, Christianity is absurd-- but strange and absurd as it may be, it's the only answer. God taking on the immensity of our wretchedness and therefore stripping Himself of His

immense glory, offering Himself in crucifixion, in an obscene and macabre spectacle to redeem the obscene and the macabre . . . "Eli, eli, lama sabachthani." How can I complain of my loneliness in this world, knowing that He found Himself far more alone?

On the night of September 21st and 22nd, when we were all fast asleep in Santa Espina, our battalion's band, which we hadn't been expecting, rudely awakened us with a blast of reveille. They'd walked the ten miles of dirt road from Villar. Grumbling, I rose from my mattress, thinking it was another of those stupid practical jokes we were always playing on each other--a particularly stupid one, since it was freezing cold out. As I went downstairs, I found Picó, Lluís, and their wives on the first-floor landing, cold, sleepy, and cursing "those damned idiots from Villar who won't give us a moment's peace." In the dining room, "those idiots from Villar" were whooping it up. Some were dancing on the table; others sang or bellowed, lying on the benches; and others made as much racket as they could with trombones and bugles. Still others were helping themselves to the bottles of rum and cognac we kept in the cabinet.

Major Rosich, the doctor, and their wives had followed the band in the Ford. In fact, he and the doctor were among those on the table, banging out a tap dance that shook the walls. You could see a mile away from their red faces, bright eyes, and grandiose gestures that they were all thoroughly sozzled.

"Gloria in excelsis Deo"--shouted the major when he saw us coming downstairs, "and the hell with the Flatfoot Brigade!"

In a corner, far from the fire, Mrs. Puig kept her distance. She gazed at it all, profoundly shocked and scandalized. When I went over to say hello, her only reply was "They're worse than those sinners in Sodom and Simorrah."

From certain half-incoherent phrases, we gathered that this wasn't just another practical joke, that something had occurred to justify it all.

It was hard to find out exactly what it was. Finally, we managed to get it out of them: a phone call had come through from our brigade's headquarters announcing that the republicans had taken Teruel. When we finally got the point, we joined the party, bellowing and drinking till sunrise, when they returned to Villar, accompanied by screeching bugles and blaring trombones.

Then, in the silence and pale light of that glacial dawn, I remembered another day, in June, exactly six months earlier. I'd gone to Parral del Río to see if I could hunt up Soleràs. Lluís had joined our brigade the day before, and I hadn't met him yet. As far as Soleràs was concerned, he wasn't around that day. Captain Picó took me to the front lines, where we thought we'd find him. From there, we could see the sinuous lines of poplars along the river banks, and in the distance, the brick steeple and houses in Vivel, a village in fascist territory. As we were admiring the view, all the bells in Vivel began ringing furiously. We heard a brass band playing, along with shouts of joy and cannon volleys. Picó and I kept quiet, making a great effort to act as though we hadn't noticed that noisy celebration. We were both thinking the same thing: that they were celebrating the fall of Bilbao. In fact, we eventually read about it in the newspapers, which always arrived late. Now six months had passed and we were celebrating the fall of Teruel. We didn't know then, and we wouldn't find out till much later, how horrible the battle had been. Moreover, the worst wasn't the capture of the city but the fascist counterattack that would drag on for weeks and months.

But we knew nothing about that at the time, and our Christmas was merry and hopeful. On the morning of the twenty-fourth, one of the heaviest snowstorms that winter began. It tapered off toward nightfall. The snow had caught me in Santa Espina. Often, when I stayed at Don

X Andalecio's house, I'd "show movies" to entertain Ramonet during those long winter evenings. That ^{evening} ~~day~~, because of the snow, no one went outdoors and even the grownups attended, since they had nothing else to do. I "showed movies" in Lluís's and Trini's room, which was spacious and had an alcove with a bed separated off by an arch. With the lantern from the cabriolet, I projected a circle of light onto a sheet I hung from the other side of the arch, inside the alcove. I'd cut some characters out of cardboard, and I ~~passed~~ ^{held moved} them in front of the lantern, creating a kind of shadow play as they appeared enlarged on the sheet. The audience, which normally consisted solely of Ramonet and his mother, watched from the larger area they used as a sitting room.

That evening, when the show ended, a bountiful supper awaited us by the fireside. We would have had to go to Villar, where the major had invited us to a "gala supper" to celebrate Christmas Eve, but we were snowed in. After supper, Lluís wanted to take the boy, bundled up in a heavy woolen blanket--not one of our army blankets, which were cotton, but one found in a house in the village--for a walk in the snow.

X It had stopped snowing. The clouds had shredded into ragged tatters that streaked the sky, and we could see Sirius twinkling through one of the ^{rips} ~~tears~~. There was an argument. Trini thought it was "downright stupid" to go out with the boy on such a cold night. It was one of the few times they argued in front of the rest of us.

X Since Lluís ^c ~~wouldn't~~ be budged, Trini decided to go along. The snow was dry and powdery. Our boots plunged into it without getting wet, making a rustling sound like thick silk. She was wearing military boots the captain had given her. Since they were too big for her, she had to pull heavy woolen socks over her stockings. She never got used to those coarse, heavy clodhoppers, but strangely enough, they suited her. On the

other hand, everything she wore seemed to suit her.

From the front door, I watched them walk down the main street, leaving behind the houses where soldiers lived in the less bombed-out part of town. The men were singing Christmas carols, accompanied by the hurdy-gurdy. They'd built a bonfire in the middle of the street, crackling and sizzling as it melted the snow, and were making a joyful racket. The moonless night was calm and icy.

When they'd disappeared around a bend, I went out by myself. I went to the lower part of town, where there was nothing but rubble. I could hear the soldiers' songs and the shrill hurdy-gurdy, more and more muffled in the distance.

In the middle of one of the streets, I saw a big forge half buried beneath the snow, looking like a giant's corpse partially covered by a shroud. It was by no means the only bizarre object one found far from its natural home. There was a carpenter's bench, a church bell, an oil press, a spring mattress, and other junk. As I walked among that clutter like the remains of a shipwreck, my boots sank into snow up to my knees. In one corner of the square outside the church, which was further down, right at the edge of town, lay the scattered remains of a harmonium. It looked as though they'd thrown it out the rose window up by the choir loft, after first smashing the window, and it had remained there, immobile, stunned by its fall.

The church, without its door, resembled a huge black mouth. A mouth that exhaled a freezing breath that seemed to come from beyond the grave. I crossed myself before entering.

There was nothing inside but bare stone. I placed my chalice on the main altar, lit two candles, and began praying.

You'd have thought the silence, as sharp as the cold, was going to

freeze solid. Through that almost crystallized silence came some barely perceptible waves of sound. Bells. It was hard to say if I was hearing them or imagining them. I stopped praying and listened. Bells on Christmas Eve! Sometimes they came through more clearly, though still from a great distance; so pure, so distant that they too seemed made of ice or crystal. I wondered at the sound of them. Could they be the bells in Heaven? How could they be earthly when no church bells had rung (moreover, hardly any were left) since the beginning of the war?

Suddenly I understood. They came from enemy territory.

Enemy? What meaning could the word have on the night before Christmas?

I understood they were celebrating Midnight Mass in some village in enemy territory, beyond no man's land. That polar air's unusual clarity and stillness had made them audible. The mystery was solved. Now the bells pealed joyfully, reminding me of piping toads on hot summer nights.

I left the church, fascinated by those far-off bells. I found myself on the dirt road, outside town, near the frozen river. I could no longer hear the carousing soldiers or the hurdy-gurdy; only those distant bells, perceptible or not as the breeze shifted. The snow was so brilliantly white that I could see as beneath a full moon. I walked uphill, through a pine grove. The dry snow rustled as my boots sank into it.

Pine branches sagged beneath the snow. Their needles, coated with frost, sparkled in the stars' faint light and made me think of that rock crystal chandelier in Trini's sitting room when I'd visited her. The stars twinkled like frost crystals. Sirius, always Sirius, shone brightly through shreds of drifting clouds: blue sparks in the very heart of that frozen universe.

I'd reached the top of the hill but I couldn't see a thing. I'd hoped

X to see the lights, the soldiers' bonfires in that village ^{and thus find out} ~~so I could know~~ where the bells were coming from. I could still hear them at times, but I couldn't see a thing.

I slowly walked back to Santa Espina. A vague, puzzling glow came from the church. I went in.

X It came from the two candles I'd left on the altar. They'd burned down to almost nothing. Between them, the silver chalice inlaid with gold ~~also~~ glimmered. I knelt and prayed for a long time.

I prayed to Doctor Gallifa. It was the first time I truly prayed to him, like someone praying to a saint, and nonetheless I still didn't know if he was dead or alive. I knew, or thought I knew, that the old Jesuit on Arc del Teatre Street had been him. That gradually had come to seem obvious to me. I prayed for a long time to my ex-teacher at the seminary, asking him to help me, not to forsake me at that crossroads where I'd begun to feel I'd lost my way.

#

The last time I'd seen him was at the house of one of his brothers, a rich landowner from Vic who spent most of the year in Barcelona, where he had an apartment on the Riera del Pi: an old apartment, very big, with high ceilings. He received me in his room: a room whose four walls disappeared beneath four bookshelves that reached the ceiling, leaving just enough space for the door and a window. His bed was hidden in a tiny alcove. He was sitting with his back to the window at a table strewn with books and papers. Except for the table, the only furniture was a rush-bottomed chair he sat in and another facing it. The room smelled of old books and snuff, because my teacher was among the few people who still took snuff. As he read, which he did for hours every day, he took pinches of snuff from a box he left open beside the book; a box I can still

picture, made of tarnished silver. The smell of snuff was inseparable from his person, as though he were impregnated with it.

He could have returned to his monastery when they stopped enforcing the anti-Jesuit laws in 1934, but because of his advanced age and delicate health, he preferred to stay on at his brother's house. So he lived with his family as a secular priest and went each day to teach his class in Christian ethics at the seminary. Since he'd left the monastery, he took more snuff than ever. Perhaps his frequent ailments and migraine headaches were due to chronic poisoning caused by all the tobacco powder he'd inhaled. At the time he was close to eighty years old.

That smell of snuff and old books was accompanied by the slow ticking of an old grandfather clock that couldn't be seen because it was in the alcove. He'd had them place it right beside his bed. He suffered from insomnia and assured me that the grandfather clock's steady ticking kept him company during those hours that otherwise would have been so long as he lay in bed in the dark. He also liked to hear the neighborhood church bells chime the hours and quarters of an hour, so he wouldn't lose ~~his sense of~~ ^{track of} time. I'm describing these details, which basically have no significance, to give an idea of the atmosphere that surrounded Doctor Gallifa in the last months of his life: an atmosphere that seemed truly to belong to another century. It was calming to be in that little room on the Riera del Pi where one could think one was in the eighteenth century, yet it was only a few steps from the Rambla, the heart of the feverish city. I'd spent long hours there, talking with him, for then--before the war--people had time to talk.

The last time was just two days before the war broke out, but we hadn't the slightest inkling. Or rather he'd heard rumors through one of his nephews named Lamonedá: a nephew he was justifiably concerned

about. He talked to me about this nephew, whom I'd known for a while.

He was very worried.

The time has also come for me to go into some detail about Lamonedá, who would later turn into my private ghost. This strange nephew was like Doctor Gallifa's shadow. I knew him quite well by then, though I had no idea that he'd later turn into mine as well. When I say shadow, I mean someone who follows us everywhere as though he emanated from us and who nonetheless is our negation, the same way they say evil is God's shadow. In my eyes--I still hadn't reached twenty--he was an old bachelor. His uncle said Lamonedá was at least forty, though he himself would only state evasively that he was "over thirty." He still hung around the university, where he was supposedly studying to be a pharmacist. How many years had he been a student? Doctor Gallifa thought he knew, but everything about this nephew was fuzzy. He'd successively studied law, philosophy, and medicine, wasting a few years on each one. When I met him, he was working as a clerk in a drugstore on Sant Pau Street that I'd been inside a few times. It was such a small, modest drugstore that it looked more like a neighborhood herbalist's shop. It was there that one evening the police arrested him on suspicion of dealing cocaine. Since they were unable to prove he'd sold it without a prescription, they had to let him go, but the druggist refused to take him back. He always tried to persuade us of his innocence, he always said he'd been the victim of a misunderstanding. His uncle believed him, or at least pretended to.

I, on the other hand, have always thought the police were on the right track. More than that, I've often suspected that Lamonedá himself was a cocaine addict. I'd sometimes seen him with a stupefied look on his face that was painful to behold: his mouth half open, his eyes seeming to stare off into the distance. That drugged expression--quite different from

a drunk's--had struck me as very suspicious. He went through flush periods, though I never knew where the money came from, and it was during these good times that I suspect he secretly indulged his vice. Usually he was rather hard up, especially after he'd been fired by that druggist on Sant Pau Street.

27 Lamonedá's father, who was a widower, lived all year in the country. Doctor Gallifa's sister, the mother of this nephew, had married the eldest son of a peasant family as well-off as the Gallifas themselves. She'd died shortly after giving birth to Lamonedá. He lived alone in Barcelona on the money his father sent him. ^{He} ~~Since he~~ ^{was} an only child, his father had gradually resigned himself to letting him lead the life of an eternal student.

X Lamonedá also considered himself eternally young. Forty years old according to his uncle's calculations, he went on talking obsessively about "we young people." He was tall and skinny, with a blotchy, pimply face. When he walked down the street, he held himself very erect and tried to give himself a military air by strutting along stiffly ~~and mechanically~~. ^{and} Moreover, he'd always enjoyed wrapping himself in mystery, as though he were involved in very important, secret affairs. He lived in a boarding house, but he'd rented a kind of garret on Tallers Street. He called that garret his "garçonnière," and on a few occasions he'd taken me up there and read me fragments from his notebooks. I remember one afternoon he read me some enigmatic passages about Baron de Koenig, a shady character from the First World War about whom I, who was born at the end of that war, had only the vaguest idea. It seems he'd been the talk of Barcelona in his time, but who had this baron really been? "A genius," Lamonedá assured me that day, "a pioneer, far ahead of his time. He realized long before anyone else how to make use of the anarchists. It was through

them that he killed off the Catalan industrialists who supplied the Allies with war material, all in the name of libertarianism and the workers' revolution. Even now, many people don't understand that the kaiser was behind the anarchist gunmen . . ." At the time I didn't pay much attention to Lamonedá's ramblings, which I thought were products of his overheated imagination. Many years later I discovered, to my horror and shock, that his chatter had been far more coherent than I'd thought.

X And even so, at the time I already knew he had some bizarre acquaintances. I knew (though his uncle didn't) that he hung around with anarchists. He himself once specified that he had dealings with gunmen, though he didn't explain what exactly he had to do with them. Neither his uncle nor I have ever been much interested in politics, and even less in underground, terrorist groups. Now I know (though I didn't find out till many years later) that back then Lamonedá already had secret connections with Llibert Milmany, but it wasn't his political activity that worried me at the time. His uncle thought he was "a person of little substance" who lived in the clouds ^{he} and believed ^{Lamonedá} in enigmatic allusions to his important, secret activities were merely the result of an unhealthy desire to make us think he was a big shot. "A poor devil," he said, "and nothing more."

Doctor Gallifa was unaware of an aspect of his nephew that would have certainly changed his mind. Lamonedá believed in nothing, though with his uncle he pretended to be a devout Catholic, and he was fixated on certain kinds of erotic adventures. He thought he was a second Stendhal. Doctor Gallifa didn't know about these literary activities, but Lamonedá sometimes read me long passages on those afternoons when he brought me up to his "garçonnière" on Tallers Street. Basically it was nothing but pornography, though he presented it as "experimental fiction." He read aloud to me with the expression of a fool who thinks he's terribly

clever. How painful it was to see that already withered face of a middle-aged bachelor who thinks he's a Don Juan, and how it all stank of the most sordid kind of self-enclosure!

Was he my uncle's Judas? I broke out in a cold sweat every time this suspicion troubled me, because in fact Lamonedá was one of the very few people (two or three) who knew where Doctor Gallifa was staying . . . I myself never managed to find out. That last time I saw Doctor Gallifa, he talked for a long time about his nephew, who troubled him more than ever. He told me that the day before, Lamonedá had come to warn him that he was in "great danger." "I couldn't make head or tail of it," Doctor Gallifa said. "I don't know what he's up to. He says he's working with some secret committees and God knows what else."

He went on believing, as he always had, that his nephew's talk was nothing but fantasies born of idleness. "He seems to think he's living in a ~~mystery~~ ^{spy} novel, and it's getting worse. I'm afraid he may be going insane . . ." That was what worried him, not the "great danger" Lamonedá had warned him about. "He tried to persuade me to go into hiding, that I'm in extreme danger, but who could wish me ill? What I'm afraid of is that this aimless life of his has affected his brain."

Less than a week later, I recognized Lamonedá among the crowd burning a church in Sant Gervasi.

"Fascist!" they shouted when I tried to stop them. I'd recognized Lamonedá despite his disguise. He hadn't shaved for several days, perhaps since his last conversation with his uncle. He was wearing a machinist's overalls, and a big red and black bandanna covered half his face. He came toward me, also shouting "Fascist!"

"Lamonedá," I whispered, "aren't you ashamed of yourself?" "Fascist!" he repeated and grabbed my arm and pulled me after him. He wove his

X way through the thick of the crowd, dragging me along with him. The
smoke pouring from the ~~church~~ ^{fire} made us cough. Flames leapt from the
chairs they'd piled in the middle of the nave. The incendiaries, with soot-
blackened faces, ~~took off~~ ^{headed for the door}, still shouting. He dragged me out of the church,
which had begun to burn and crackle.

"Aren't you ashamed?" I repeated.

"I warned the two of you," he replied in a whisper. "Now get the hell
out of here or they'll lynch you. It's not my fault if you never pay
attention to what I say!"

X The incendiaries began to crowd around us, visibly intrigued by me.
It's not that I was wearing a cassock, far from it. During summer
vacations I never wore one. But I was the only person not disguised as a
worker. I wore a neatly pressed, white cotton summer suit. But nothing
could have attracted more attention at that time! Some of those brutes
were already saying to each other, "If he's a fascist, why don't we kill
him?" When Lamonedá heard them, he stretched out his hands for silence
and said, "Comrades, this man you see before you was a priest, but he no
longer is one. He just told me he repents and wants to join in our
struggle. Long live anarchy! ~~Hurray~~ ^{and} for free love! Make way for youth!" I
was struck by how easily he swayed that ragged mob. They hung on his
every word as though he were their oracle and frantically repeated after
him. The last slogan stuck in my memory more than the others: "Make way
for youth!" How many times, and in what different circumstances, as
strange or stranger than those, would I hear it repeated; how many times
. . . When I finally managed to get away (and I can say in all truth that I
owe my life to Lamonedá), I rushed back to the house in Sarrià where I
lived with my aunt. I was dying to look at Barcelona through my
telescope. You could see a good part of the city from there, and in fact I

saw that all the churches were smoking at the same time. All at the same time.

That evening we learned that they hadn't just burned churches. They'd also killed priests. As soon as dawn broke, I hurried down to the Riera del Pi. Doctor Gallifa's brother told me he no longer lived there and that for safety's sake, they didn't want to tell anyone outside the family circle where he was hiding.

Well, I didn't belong to the "family circle," but Lamonedá did. He knew where Doctor Gallifa was hiding. Barcelona burned and crackled under a pitiless midsummer sky and gangs of immigrants from other parts of Spain, dressed in rags and masked with soot, ran here and there, hunting down priests ^{and killing} ~~they planned to massacre.~~

That implacable hunt lasted for months and months, and Lamonedá, the leader of one of these gangs, knew where ^{Doctor Gallifa} ~~he~~ was. I don't doubt that at first he wanted to save him, just as he certainly saved me. But what might have happened afterward in his twisted mind? Could he have ended up selling his uncle in a moment of weakness?

#

And so, on that Christmas Eve, I prayed to him for the first time. And nonetheless I didn't know, at least for sure, if he was dead. I prayed for a long time in that church in Santa Espina, as bare and chilly as a tomb. I prayed for I don't know how long to my ex-teacher, wherever he might be, in this world or the next. When I left, those church bells had stopped ^{pealing.} ~~ringing.~~ I halted for a moment at the door because I saw something very odd: in addition to my footprints, there were two other pairs of boots. Two people had come in and then gone away while I was praying, because I remembered that there had been no footprints but my own when I'd gone in for the second time. Two unknown people had

entered the church while I was praying; and I hadn't heard them.

VI

Merceditas and Mrs. Picó returned to Barcelona the day after Epiphany. The major's wife and Trini decided to stay on for a few more weeks, since the fresh air and ~~abundant~~ ^{plentiful} food seemed to do the two children good. Fleets of planes based in Majorca were bombing Barcelona more and more frequently, and it was harder and harder to get food there, so we all thought Ramonet and Marieta should stay on as long as that front was covered ~~with~~ ^{by} snow. There was complete agreement on this point. That the battle of Teruel had taken place despite the snow didn't seem like an objection, since that's what had enabled us to mount a surprise attack. So Trini requested a two-month leave from the university, and I recall that the dean, in his reply, jokingly congratulated her on enjoying "such abundance and tranquility at the front."

It was by no means our only quiet front. There were lots of areas as calm as ours, and the case of Trini and Mrs. Rosich wasn't as unusual as it might seem now. We'd gradually sunk into that peace and quiet, that winter, as into a chronic disease that one ends up getting used to. In any case, despite the battle of Teruel--which struck us as so exceptional and remote--none of us thought there could be any fighting in those mountains till the snow melted. As though to reinforce our delusions, the generals at headquarters never got around to sending us the arms and recruits we needed to bring up to strength all those brigades and battalions destroyed during the summer and that were now in a kind of hibernation among those frozen peaks. The reason I'm going into all this is to justify myself, since in Trini's decision to stay till the beginning of spring, a decision that was to have such dramatic consequences, my opinion weighed heavily.

A few days after Mrs. Puig's and Mrs. Picó's departures I decided to spend the day in Santa Espina. I often went without phoning first, and this was the case on that day. I found that Lluís and Picó had gone off on one of their more and more frequent expeditions to the deserted valley, no man's land. So Trini was alone with her little boy in Don Andalecio's house.

She'd found something the day before and wanted to show it to me: a mahogany armchair, apparently from the time of Louis XVI, that had appeared in the attic of the bombed-out rectory. She'd installed it in their room, in front of a big window the sun streamed through at that time of day. Looking out, we could see the fields around Purroy buried beneath three or four feet of snow. A big baroque brazier, another of her finds, warmed the room. They'd found sacks of dried olive skins--what was left after they'd been pressed--in every house in the village, so it was no problem keeping a brazier lit in every room. When I entered, Ramonet was amusing himself by drawing in a sketchbook. An only child, he was used to playing alone and sometimes would talk to himself aloud, even quarreling with himself as he would have with another child.

X I sat down in that armchair, facing the window, while Trini sat in front of me so that I saw her against the light. The sunlight--a January sun that could be dazzling in that ~~sharp~~ ^{little clear} crisp air--sparkled on her hair. That day was the first time I realized she was a redhead. It was a very subtle shade of red, only noticeable in the ⁹ direct sunlight, and that's why I hadn't spotted it before. Ramonet came up and asked me to make him a cardboard doll, but his mother told him to leave us alone.

I understood that she wanted to talk with me, and this gave me a feeling of comfort and satisfaction. I felt so good in that room with her.

"I'm happy," she said. "I've never seen the boy looking so healthy."

This front suits him to a tee."

"It seems to suit you too," I replied.

"Bah, as far as I'm concerned . . ."

X A silence fell that, clumsy as I am, I didn't know how to ^{break.} ~~fill~~ I
X didn't understand what she ^{had in mind} ~~was driving at~~, why she wanted to talk to me
alone. I felt so good in that room with her. She must have found some red
ocher in one of the empty houses, because the floor tiles were now shiny
and their brilliant red contrasted very pleasantly with the whitewashed
walls. "How much everything's changed since she came!" I thought. The
most surprising thing was the changed aspect of all that junk from other
centuries: those chairs, that writing desk, that baroque table, that hope
chest. Trini had had them brought up to her room, which as I've said was
very spacious, with an alcove and a sitting area. She'd plugged the
wormholes with wax and polished and polished with a coarse woolen cloth,
coaxing forth a warm glow from the old walnut that was soothing to the
eyes. She'd placed mortars, oil lamps, candelabra, chocolate pots, and other
copper objects she'd found on various pieces of furniture. She'd scrubbed
and polished them too to get rid of the tarnish, and now they shone like
red gold. When one of the winter sun's slanting rays, slipping almost
horizontally through the window, struck one of them, it flared up like a
fire. They weren't all purely ornamental; she used the candelabra and oil
lamps. When night fell, and it fell early, she lit them to make those long
winter evenings less gloomy. "How amazing," I thought. "It's as though
X someone had waved a magic wand over this room. It's ^I ~~now~~ so cozy . . ."

In that room, you felt as if you were in a prosperous peasant's house,
rustic and patriarchal. There was an intense smell of lavender, because
she'd placed bunches of it everywhere. "The scent of fields and woods," I
thought, "the scent of a big house run by a young bride." It was the first

time I'd realized that Trini, without being aware of it, seemed to have been born to be the mistress of a big, old, stately ancestral home. I felt good in that room, near her, even though the two of us were silent. You have to feel very good with someone to sit together in silence without embarrassment.

X "As for me," she added, breaking that silence, "I'm nothing ~~more than~~ ^{but} a failure."

"A failure?" I exclaimed in amazement, because in truth this was the last thing I'd expected her to come out with. "A failure? That depends on you and you alone."

X "Don't think I'm saying this because I've broken with Lluís. Please . . . Life is absurd, ~~but not to that point~~ ^{that absurd.} I don't care about Lluís one way or the other."

Her gaze was hard and metallic. I looked down. Suddenly she asked another question I wasn't expecting either.

"Do you know my brother?"

"Llibert?" But I caught myself in time. Everything I knew about Trini's brother I'd learned from her letters.

"Lluís hates him, and rightly so. I hate him as much as he does. At least Lluís and I agree about something."

"Lluís told me a little about him," I lied, for in fact Lluís had never mentioned him, or barely. "Soleràs too . . . excuse me for mentioning Soleràs."

"Excuse you? It was precisely to talk about Soleràs that I invited you up here. I'm dying to talk about him with you . . . we'll get around to Soleràs. Right now let's stick to my brother Llibert, who's the exact opposite of Soleràs. Llibert belongs to the race of those who only believe in success."

"I'm familiar with that race," I said, "but who knows if Llibert . . ."

"Please, I implore you: leave Christian charity aside. It'd be very boring to talk about Llibert in a spirit of Christian charity. Llibert, as I was saying, belongs to the race of winners. For him all faith, religious or otherwise, exists only to console the losers, 'opium for a vast army of losers': those were his very words. Because he's a windbag, you know. He's one of those people who listen to themselves when they talk."

"All those of his race are like that: consumed by their own rhetoric."

X "Well, I hate the race of winners as much as I love ~~that~~ of losers. When I said 'I'm a failure,' I meant I'm of the same race as Soleràs. You see, I've given you a clue."

"But Lluís is nothing like Llibert. He's not a 'winner,' as you put it. He's not a windbag."

"Lluís? How little you know him! Cruells, you're mistaken about Lluís. Unfortunately, I made the same mistake. Right now, Lluís is more interested in women than banknotes. His successes are of another order, but isn't it basically the same thing? Why should we only measure success in terms of money? The world is vast and varied, there are many other equally selfish goals. Lluís . . . oof . . . you also have to bear in mind that, unlike Llibert, Lluís has never been poor. Why should he have run after money when for the moment he had all he needed? Lluís is still very young, and what attracts him most is women. But who knows? Perhaps one day he'll be the biggest noodle manufacturer in Europe!"

She said it in a disagreeably sarcastic tone. All she'd done was repeat Uncle Eusebi's prophesy that I knew about from those letters I'd read on the sly. I tried to defend Lluís.

"Right now you hate him . . . and hatred's like a warped mirror that distorts everything."

"Someday you'll be forced to admit I'm right. There's a rapacity in Lluís that up till now has only manifested itself with women. Talking about Lluís makes me queasy. I don't want to talk about Lluís or Llibert in particular but about their race in general. The race of winners revolts me. Everything except success is nonsense to them, and the only success they care about is quick, easy, and worldly. Now you know I'm a geologist; or let's say, more modestly, that I teach geology. In geology, centuries are a sigh and millenia a dream. Only millions of years make a difference. No, I'm not planning to bore you with chatter about geology. The only thing I want to know is what sense the success of one of these winners can have in geology. Perhaps less than that of a mosquito in the Carboniferous Period who succeeded in being fossilized in a drop of amber."

I looked out the window and kept quiet. I was trying to figure out how I should answer her and how I could manage to lead the conversation in the direction I wanted. "I'll have to go the long way round," I thought, "but where should I start?"

"A mosquito?" I asked. "A mosquito from the Carboniferous Period? Please . . . Lluís is no mosquito . . . Not even Llibert . . . It's not that I'm trying to deny, since it's too obvious, that by our own efforts we can never be more than dust ~~that~~ the winds of centuries will scatter, less than a mosquito fossilized in a drop of amber. I know fossilization is an extraordinary stroke of luck. For an unbeliever, death is utter failure. That's why unbelievers are obsessed by success. We should be so indulgent, so understanding with those poor unbelievers. For them there's nothing but success, worldly success, as quick as possible. Only this can give meaning to their lives. You call them winners; you could also call them complacent, since they all pretend to be satisfied with themselves. They pretend to be satisfied so we'll think they've succeeded. How we should pity all those

who go around acting smug, those who, if they stopped to think about it, would like to be fossilized for all eternity with smug looks on their faces! But are they really as smug as they act? Of course not; quite the contrary. Or rather, they're satisfied with themselves but not with other people or things. Because don't forget, Trini, that if to be self-satisfied is truly laughable, to be satisfied with other people and things isn't merely good; it's saintly."

"That's not what I was talking about at all," she said. "I wasn't talking about saints but about Lluís and Llibert."

"I don't know your brother and wouldn't want to imply anything about him. It's always rash to judge an individual. I was only referring to a certain way of being. I was referring to those obsessed with success, who pretend they're successful when every instant turns their success into failure, as every instant brings them closer to death, which for them--since they're unbelievers--is the ultimate failure. Blessed are those who feel like failures! A feeling of failure is the first step toward the only possible success. Where, then, is the success of the satisfied--I mean those satisfied with themselves? They are the great failures, and that's why they're obsessed with success. As far as your brother Llibert is concerned, I didn't mean to imply anything about him. God forbid that we should judge anyone! Only God can see into our souls; only He can judge us. Invariably, and this must be an experience you've had at times in your life as I have, when a person reveals for a moment what's really in his soul, he inspires sympathy, compassion. We all deserve pity! Precisely because hardly anyone likes to inspire pity, it's extremely unusual for anyone to allow us to glimpse his soul."

"Yes. We'd rather die than let anyone know how miserable we are."

"So let's leave Llibert out of this. As far as Lluís is concerned . . ."

X At that moment, Ramonet interrupted us to show me a house he was drawing in his sketchbook, "a house where wolves live," he explained, "and these wolves have everything: ~~green peppers~~, hammers, scissors, ^{peppers,} grandmothers." I suggested that he draw a pot so the wolves could cook soup. Talking with the boy took a weight off me, as awkward as I felt with his mother. I was starting to feel vaguely scared of Trini, and she knew it.

"The other day," she said, "I thought of that 'gala luncheon' in Villar when you talked about those who 'are unhappy but brazenly deny it.' 'There are a lot of people like that,' you said, 'people who would rather be thought shameless than unhappy. Plenty of people would rather be considered cunning or even wicked than unhappy. Notice,' you said, 'how all the words that imply that someone deserves pity--like "pitiful" itself or "pathetic"--have taken on negative connotations . . . We're ashamed of misfortune; unhappiness makes us feel crushed by ridicule!' You told me this and many other things at that 'gala luncheon,' and yesterday it all came back to me. You talked a lot about that teacher of yours at the seminary whose name I can't remember. I gathered that you're very fond of him. Didn't you say he was the same Jesuit who was the priest for ^{is in} Lluís's congregation? Lluís ^{mentioned} ~~talked about~~ him once or twice, ^{about} this Father Garrofa or Pellissa or whatever his name is, but in very different terms."

X 2X "That 'gala luncheon' ended deplorably," I said, "but we were talking about something else. Basically I agree with you, but we shouldn't go too far. There are legitimate successes. To bear failure with resignation is the sign of a true Christian, but to seek it deliberately ^{is} ~~would be~~ like suicide. This was one of Soleràs's errors. It seemed as though he'd set out to fail at everything, and this isn't Christian because it's not human. Blessed be

2x failure when it comes in the form of poverty, illness, others' lack of love or understanding, defeat, or some great and frustrated longing that perhaps was our ^{our} reason for ^{existing} being; blessed be failure because it will make us better, but it's wrong to deliberately seek it. Blessed be death when it comes, but we mustn't try to hasten it! Soleràs was gravely mistaken in this as in other things. Once he even told me, 'If I haven't gotten around to committing suicide, it's because I'd rather be a frustrated suicide, a failure even in suicide!' Yes, those were his very words on one occasion. Perhaps it was just talk, but his talk often betrayed his true feelings. And again, excuse me for mentioning Soleràs so often."

"Excuse you? But I've already told you Soleràs is precisely what I want to talk about. Is it forbidden to talk about Soleràs?"

"At that 'gala luncheon,' it seemed that you didn't want to hear him talked about."

She fell silent and looked me straight in the eye.

"What do you imagine there is between us?"

"Nothing, I'm sure. It's just that I seem to detect the influence of his ideas on yours, which doesn't surprise me since he influenced all of us. It's impossible to know someone like Soleràs without being affected by him! It's funny how three orphans ended up in this brigade: Lluís, Soleràs, and myself, all raised by aunts. Don't laugh; anyone raised as an orphan is always an orphan. Our childhoods mark us for life. Soleràs used to say everyone has the aunt he deserves. If you knew my aunt! My aunt Llàucia . . . If you knew her . . . Did I ever tell you my greatest dream was to be a priest in some industrial town on the outskirts of Barcelona? Well, these last few weeks I haven't been so sure of myself. I don't really know what I want. If you knew my aunt Llàucia! The exact opposite of Soleràs's aunt . . . I've never known the warmth of family life. I have only a vague

X ~~ended up hating~~ ^{came to hate} her kind of devotion. She made me hate it; she's so blindly loyal. Sometimes I wonder if it wasn't loyalty that kept her from marrying; the idea of a man from outside our family appalls her. Of course she's unaware of it, but her instincts would lead her into incest. Keep it all in the family! Even when I was a little boy, I felt there was something wrong with that stifling family atmosphere like a stuffy bedroom that's never aired. My God, even the holiest things can be perverted! Because the family is holy. Jesus lived for thirty years in the bosom of his family. Now I understand: it was my aunt who made me hate it. In these last few weeks, I've suddenly understand that I was created to head a family."

I took a deep breath. There was silence.

"From what you've just told me," she said, "I gather that you no longer want to be a priest. But for someone who's not a Catholic . . . whether you become a priest or not . . . what importance . . ."

"But you're a Catholic!" I said, disconcerted.

"I wanted to be one. Yes, I wanted to be one, perhaps only because he is. I'm not talking about Lluís, naturally. That would be stupid. And now . . . where is he? And without him . . . Catholic! What does 'Catholic' mean? Something like Buddhist, spiritualist, Muslim, Mormon? There are so many religions . . . How could we ever choose one over the others? Catholic . . . what does it mean? Let's not say Catholic; let's say Christian, which is broader. But even then, what does it mean to be a Christian? No one knows! On the other hand, some people know exactly where Soleràs is!"

I knew absolutely nothing about his whereabouts at that moment, and Trini's unexpected outburst took me by surprise. What did she mean? How

could she expect anyone to know where Soleràs was when we hadn't heard a word from him? It's true that I'd often wondered, as Doctor Puig had, at all the things Picó and Lluís found in no man's land, but although I'd suspected--and in fact was certain--that they had dealings with the fascists and probably bartered with them, it had never crossed my mind that this could have anything to do with Soleràs's disappearance.

"Yes, don't play dumb," Trini said bitterly. "They know exactly where Soleràs is, but they won't tell. You remember when Lluís and I went out for a walk with the boy on Christmas Eve. Lluís carried him in his arms, wrapped in a blanket. We walked very slowly because of the snow; those army boots the captain had lent me sank into it up to my knees. As we walked along we heard some bells pealing far away, almost inaudible, and Lluís blurted out, 'Maybe Soleràs is at Midnight Mass.' 'Soleràs in fascist territory?' I exclaimed, indignant that Lluís would suggest such a thing. 'Anything's possible with Soleràs. Maybe deep down he's nothing more than a traitor.' That's what Lluís told me, and despite all my nagging I've never been able to get another word out of him. All their trips to no man's land, all the unexpected things they find there, their secretiveness . . ."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing in particular, because I myself don't understand it. You all tell us over and over again that one fine day Soleràs vanished from this brigade and you haven't heard from him since. Well, I have the impression that you know quite well where he is."

As the time I really didn't know and insisted that I was innocent.

"Don't try and fool me, Cruells. That's why I was so eager to have a long talk with you today when they're not around. I want you to tell me where Soleràs is. I'm sick of you all making fun of me!"

The oddest thing was that while she talked about Soleràs I was

thinking of Lamonedà. And yet what did he have to do with Soleràs's disappearance or with Trini? I was thinking of Lamonedà and Doctor Gallifa's disappearance, about which I knew no more than I did about Soleràs.

"I don't know where he is," I said, "nor do I know if he's dead or alive."

"Soleràs isn't dead!" she exclaimed.

"I didn't mean Soleràs; I meant Doctor Gallifa. Perhaps he was betrayed by a Judas. Yes, he had a Judas at his side, like a shadow. His name was Lamonedà . . ."

"You're making fun of me!" she cut in bitterly. "What are you trying to get at?"

"Get at?" I felt like replying. "How should I know? When everything's so murky . . . If I told you sometimes Lamonedà strikes me as a caricature of Soleràs. A grotesque caricature, granted! More than likely they don't even know each other, but the fact is I can't remember one without remembering the other." I'd have liked to say all that, but I kept quiet. The look in her eyes made me understand that she'd never follow me down this twisted path where I myself would have ~~gotten lost~~ *lost my way*.

"You know," I muttered, "this Lamonedà was the first one who made me aware of certain things I'd never suspected . . . Since you're from an anarchist family, perhaps you've heard of Baron de Koenig."

"Now it's Baron de Koenig?" she asked, and her gaze turned mocking, almost cruel. "What do I care about Baron Koenig? Why don't you tell me about Soleràs?"

"Soleràs is a riddle, just like Lamonedà. Like all of us! But Soleràs is a more puzzling riddle than the others. The more you puzzle over it, the less you understand. There are much more troubling enigmas in Soleràs's

case than the one you're worrying about. Because after all, if he'd joined the fascists, that would be understandable. Many others have done the same. Why I myself, on one occasion . . . No; Soleràs's enigma isn't so simple. I should tell you exactly what I think, Trini. I should tell you about one of my last conversations with him. I should tell you exactly what I think: maybe Soleràs has been good for you up to now, but from now on he can only cause you irreparable harm. Soleràs is a riddle, and you'll never find the answer. He can only lead to your ~~downfall~~ *destruy destruction*."

Her green eyes shone with painful eagerness. She listened to me, open-mouthed. More than listening, she drank in my words.

"What does 'adoptive father' mean?" he asked me the last time we had a long talk. At the time, I had no idea what he was referring to. 'The other's ghost,' he continued, 'would always get in the way . . .' I couldn't understand what he was saying. Imagine, he was talking about ~~the~~ *I* what he called the 'adoptive heresy.' 'If Jesus were only God's adopted son,' he said, 'the other would overshadow God, and then we'd really be screwed!' Those were his exact words. The same old crazy talk, you know, but now I'm beginning to understand what he meant. I have to be frank with you, Trini; it's my duty. There are some very odd sides to Soleràs. Another time--this was quite a while ago--one November night, he spent hours telling me about how at his aunt's house, between midnight and four in the morning . . . things that would make anyone gape in astonishment. Did he make them up? I doubt it. He seemed so ashamed of himself! Things like that only embarrass you when they're true. And even if he'd made them up, since anything's possible, such a wild imagination . . . always taking things to such extremes . . . He growled sarcastically, 'The other's ghost would always get in the way. Isn't it enough that we have to put up with our own? Now you want to saddle us with someone else's too?' Take

the good parts and protect yourself from the irreparable harm he could do you in the future. Yes, Soleràs can do a lot of harm."

A sort of rain-swollen cloud now floated in her eyes. "More than harm, better that harm," she muttered resentfully. "There are things no one can understand unless he's lived through them. What do I care about harm if it comes from him? A woman loves this kind of harm more than all the good on earth. But you could never understand me. You've never been in love!"

X "Never ^{been} in love? What makes you so sure? Do you think people who want to be priests belong to a different species, but since you yourself seem to be egging me on . . . no doubt to make fun of me . . . I'm a shy person; I know it and I suffer for it. The worst thing about people like me is that we know we're shy. That's what upsets us: knowing it. Since we're shy, we never know what we should say and what we should keep quiet about. It's so hard for us to say what we should say that we end up blurting out what we should keep to ourselves."

"Why don't you just say what you want to say. That's always best."

"What I want to say?"

"Yes. Just say it."

"Sometimes one wants to say what another may not want to hear . .

." I said, feeling very uncomfortable.

"Say it anyway."

"What I want to say . . . Well, I'll tell you: nothing matters except love. If it weren't for love, which transfigures men and women in each others' eyes, we'd hardly be anything . . . But our dreams take us so far from love, plunging us into such shadowy depths . . ."

"What dreams?" she asked.

"All my life I've suffered from nightmares, and I've even sleepwalked

a couple of times. I think I told you about it. The strangeness of these things (and I don't mean only sleepwalking but ordinary dreams as well) belongs to a family of psychic phenomena Soleràs discussed on that long November night I mentioned. Except for what Soleràs told me and what I'd read in some books we studied at the seminary, I know very little about them. Apparently these phenomena that so astound everyone are closely related to sleepwalking and hypnosis. Almost everyone denies the reality of the former but acknowledges it in the latter, which nonetheless is an inconsistency. Moreover, without having to refer to sleepwalking or hypnosis, aren't ordinary dreams, the kind almost everyone has, in themselves inexplicable? And nonetheless, who can deny that we have them? We have them, yes, but who can say where they come from?"

"I never dream," she replied, "or almost never."

"You have no idea how lucky you are, because it's hard to bear this burden of inexplicable things. We know nothing about ourselves. We're full of things we don't even suspect. We're especially incomprehensible to ourselves."

Trini seemed not to be following my train of thought.

X "Forgive me, I beg you. On the other hand, it was you you urged me to say what I like. Didn't you tell me to say what I want to say? Let's start over again. What does it mean to be in love? No one can answer that one either. People say they're Catholics, spiritualists, Mormons, fascists, republicans, in love, but what do these words mean? What does it all mean? All these ^{words?} ~~names~~ are they any more precise than our dreams? What are dreams? What is faith, idealism, love? Everything's so confusing . . . Everyone carries around a well inside him whose bottom he's never reached, assuming that it has a bottom. Sometimes we go down into it, but that's in our dreams. And once we're awake, we can't make head or tail of

them. Forgive me"--she still looked as though she couldn't follow me--"but you urged me to be straightforward."

"If this is what you call being straightforward . . ." she said.

X "Well then, I'll tell you more simply. Love, like faith, is a tree. It spreads its foliage in the open air beneath the sun, but its roots plunge into mud. I'll tell you as simply as possible: there's an incomprehensible and unbearable duality in us. Open air and sunlight attract us, but so does mud. You asked me if I knew what being in love is, ~~I don't know~~, but neither do you."

There was another silence. She seemed to be pondering my last words.

"I'd never thought about it this way," she said, "but maybe you're right, Cruells. In any case, what difference does that make to me? Why should I care what being in love is, as long as it exists? It exists, and that's enough."

"Doctor Gallifa . . ."

"Doctor Gallifa again?"

"But . . ."

I felt tired and depressed. The priest in that attic had been Doctor Gallifa! It could have been no one else! That look without conviction but so full of faith; the most ordinary of the apostles, the octogenarian bowed beneath years and infirmity, defeated but undefeatable. It had been him, it could have been no other, but how could I tell her? Would I ever get up the courage to tell her I'd read her letters? 'You saw him! It could be no other!' I wanted to scream, as in a nightmare when one tries to shout but the cry sticks in one's throat. Again I stopped myself just in time. To tell her everything I wanted to say? Impossible! I was dying to talk about her letters to Soleràs, but I couldn't do it. A burning shame rose up inside me,

making me blush: shame at having read them.

I made an effort, because I saw her gaze turn mocking again as she watched me redden.

"I don't know if I really have the right to speak to you so frankly, but since you yourself urged me . . . I'll open my heart and tell you that over the past few weeks, I've come to feel that for me, the priesthood isn't the way to happiness. Don't interrupt. I'm in love. I've never been in love before, so it's not surprising that I don't have much practice."

I'd shut my eyes, and I sat there in silence for a while. Then, without opening them (I was afraid of the look on her face), I slowly said, "I'm free to marry. All I have to do is leave the seminary and enroll at the university. But she . . . is she free? Yes she is. She lives in concubinage, as canon law puts it. Excuse the expression; I don't like it either, but it's the exact legal term and therefore the clearest. Marriage is either a sacrament or it's nothing. I mean the only thing that makes it indissoluble is its sacred character, which comes not from the outward ceremony, as so many people who haven't studied canon law seem to think, but from the intentions of the two partners. Can we say that such intentions have been expressed in the case at hand? No. I've thought it over carefully before arriving at this conclusion. If you knew how many times, in Doctor Gallifa's ethics class, we'd gone over and over these subtle, tricky points . . . But don't get upset; I'll leave Doctor Gallifa out of this. I won't mention him again. In brief, after wracking my brain trying to figure out if the person who interests me is free or not, I've come to the conclusion that she is and always has been, not because of the lack of some outward ceremony, Catholic or civil, which basically has very little importance, but because she and he never intended to form a permanent union."

#

At that moment, Ramonet tugged at his mother's skirts.

"Mommy, I'm hungry . . ."

"Go play for a while more. Can't you see I'm talking with this gentleman?"

Sad because we refused to pay attention to him, the boy went back to his sketchbook by the brazier. But a moment later he returned and said, "He's not a gentleman; he's Cruells."

"Don't bother us now, Ramonet. Go on. I was getting very interested. You were saying that according to canon law, the person in question lives in a state of concubinage . . ."

"In fact, she no longer does. Even this obstacle has disappeared! She's as free as I am. She's broken with him. The two of them try to keep up appearances; they pretend they're still a couple. It's absurd! What's the point of keeping up appearances if they were living in concubinage?"

"None, really. It's not worth the trouble."

"With the peculiarity that she later converted to Christianity. Now that she's a Christian, she has to make a decision: either she consecrates her union or she breaks it off forever. And then . . ."

"Then you and she . . ."

Her green eyes looked at me, disappointed at this all too predictable ending. That disappointed look was hard to bear. Despite everything, I felt calm.

In fact, I felt like someone who's taken a load off his chest.

X H "My novel is disappointing. It's hardly more than a corny romance for twelve-year-old girls. But it's mine. It's the only one I have. And for me . . . for me it's gripping. Just to imagine sitting with her by the fire some

fall or winter evening . . . Because one has to sit down from time to time; man was not created to stand eternally. Right now, both sides would like us to be constantly on our feet: 'Spaniards, arise!', 'Catalans arise!' But nonetheless, one has to sit down from time to time. To spend our whole lives standing up would be intolerable. Man was created to sit by the fire on winter evenings beside the woman he loves. As you can see, my novel's simple-minded. It's plot is short and dull. But to me it's deeply moving."

"And what about her . . ."

"Her! Wouldn't it be better, since they're no longer a couple, for her to make a clean break? Think about it. Their relationship can't go on indefinitely. It's a farce neither one of them could live with. It's . . . stupid."

"I agree."

"There's one complicating factor," I said, feeling my hands tremble, "and it's this: he's one of my closest friends."

She looked even more disappointed.

"What a coincidence," she said sarcastically.

"And he still loves her. He's never stopped loving her. He loves her more than ever and she's making him suffer."

"Yes, Olivela's certainly making him suffer."

"Stop joking, I beg you."

"Then the doctor's wife?"

"Stop joking," I repeated. "The doctor's wife? What does she have to do with this mess? The doctor's wife! She's a nitwit!"

"Precisely. That's why he's after her. She doesn't have to be another Madame Curie. Cologne, packs of Camels . . . What wouldn't he bring her from no man's land?"

"Don't joke about it. I'm talking very seriously. My friend's made

mistakes, like everybody. But she won't forgive him. And yet she's a Christian, you know . . ."

"A Christian . . ."

"But she hasn't understood that all Christianity can be summed up in a single word: forgiveness."

"I'm glad to hear it," and her green eyes filled with tears. She had to blow her nose.

"Do you think I'd commit a vile action, that I'd betray my friend, if I confessed my feelings to the woman I love? What should a man in my situation do?"

Trini blew her nose noisily and pushed away Ramonet, who was tugging at her skirts again and wanted to show her another drawing.

"Don't kid yourself, Cruells. You can't imagine what Lluís has put me through. When I lived only for him and our child . . . He had me by his side and didn't even see me; whole days without saying a word"--Trini got upset again and blew her nose--"weeks and months without writing a single line . . . It's not this ridiculous affair in Olivela, as you seem to think. Let me finish; don't interrupt me! What do you know about my life? Excuse me for saying so, but you can't see what's in front of you. You always give the impression of having your head in the clouds. Don't be offended. I don't mean this as an insult. You're a dreamer, Cruells! Couldn't you see how he and Merceditas were flirting all those weeks? Yes, he and Merceditas . . . You think I didn't notice? Poor Cruells, you have no idea what women are like! In cases like this nothing escapes us, I can assure you. Olivela, Merceditas, and all the others I'll never know about . . . You managed to palm off an entire sermon on me, Cruells. You figured out how to make me sit still to the very end. Now it's my turn to talk. You're mistaken about me. That ~~with~~ ^{with} you've tried to make me believe

A about Soleràs . . . yes, ~~fill~~ ^{est} . . . you . . . exactly like Lluís . . . like all
of you . . . Why, why do you hate him so much? Why? Because he's a
thousand times better than all of you put together, than this whole lousy
brigade, than the entire universe . . ."

She burst into sobs, to Ramonet's enormous surprise.

VII

At the beginning of February, some peasants returned to the two villages. The calm in the entire area, which had lasted for months, had encouraged them. Each one fixed up his ruined house as best he could, just enough to have someplace to sleep and cook. Then they plowed some of the plots down by the river near the villages. They plowed with donkeys, since they'd lost their mules--requisitioned by one army or the other. More cautious than we were, for the moment they didn't dare to bring their wives and children.

2X Thus we began to hear, amid the blackened rubble, almost forgotten ^{sounds} ~~voices~~ of peace: braying donkeys, bleating lambs and goats, and clucking hens. That resurrection, however tentative, seemed like a dream and certainly played a great role in our feeling of utter security, from which events one day would so rudely awaken us.

Teruel seemed more distant than ever, since all news reached us days or even weeks late and moreover was distorted by the war censorship. Our battalion--or more precisely, what was left of it--scraped along in those two out-of-the-way villages, which for us were the entire world. We were barely in touch with the rest of the army. Our arms and recruits still hadn't arrived. They would never arrive. Later I found out this was the case in many other battalions covering an extensive area on both sides of us. Hundreds of miles of the Catalan front--the Aragonese front--were in effect unprotected, and our soldiers sank into the ~~the~~ ^{the} sloth of that long, snowbound winter.

X Sure that the two children were better off with us than in Barcelona, we kept putting off the women's departure. Thus we reached the beginning of March, three weeks before the first day of spring. We'd decided that

they should definitely leave on the fourth. They'd been with us for almost three months.

Well, that day Ramonet woke up with a fever. Nothing alarming; children so frequently run a fever!

"A common or garden variety flu" was Doctor Puig's diagnosis, "but he should spend a few days in bed. He can't undertake such a long and difficult trip in this cold with a 103° fever."

So the major's wife and Marieta set out in the Ford by themselves.

X She didn't want to postpone their departure, since she was ^{all packed &} ready to leave ~~that day~~.
X ~~that day~~ The next morning I went to Santa Espina to see how Ramonet was doing. I was about to open the door to their room when I heard Lluís and Trini arguing in furious whispers.

"You can't understand," Trini hissed.

"You're dying to be understood," Lluís replied. "That must be why you wrote him all those long letters. He understood you, right?"

"Shut up."

There was a moment of silence. I was about to knock on the door when I heard Lluís's voice again.

"What's the point of understanding? Do you think you understand me? You think this war is more fun than a barrel of monkeys, and if you only knew . . . why, sometimes it's even more boring than peace."

"What about me? Do you think it's fun starving in Barcelona while you advance heroically, assaulting one feudal dame after another . . ."

"Feudal dames? What are you blathering about?"

"And medical dames too! Yes, feudal and medical!"

"Stop talking nonsense. That's stupid!"

"Stupid? ^{you're damned right it is!} I won't deny it!"

"We've both suffered, Trini, each in his own way. Do we have to

haggle over it? We've both suffered, and the thing now isn't to try and figure out whose fault it was. Suppose it was all my fault. Is that any reason to go on torturing each other for the rest of our lives? Can't two people be man and wife and still love each other?"

"We're not man and wife," Trini shot back without the slightest hesitation.

"But we could be. It would be very easy."

"It's too late for that."

Silence fell again.

"Don't kid yourself about Soleràs," Lluís's voice finally said. "He's nothing but a hopeless neurotic. I could tell you all kinds of stories . . . but you wouldn't believe me."

"That's right."

"Basically, he's nothing more than a traitor."

"If you say so . . ."

"I could tell you exactly what fascist unit he's in right now."

"You're a liar! Why would he change sides?"

"Why not? He's always been a traitor! He betrayed me, his bosom buddy! Tell me: how would you describe what he tried to pull with you behind my back? And after betraying me, then he went on to betray you! He made himself scarce as soon as the prospect of marriage reared its ugly head! As a suitor or lover or whatever you want to call it, Soleràs is remarkable in more than one respect. Hopeless loves are the only kind he goes for! As soon as they might become less hopeless, he vanishes without a trace. If we didn't go so far back and I didn't have proof to the contrary, his bizarre behavior would lead me to believe he's a . . . well, let's say lacking in something or other . . . But I know him, oof; I know him backward and forward. He's cracked in the head; he's off his rocker.

2x

And he never washes his feet. Ask Captain Picó."

X
X "It's over between you and me," Trini coldly interrupted. "You're wasting your time with this orgy of ~~filth~~ ^{dirt} and insults, just like it was a waste of time sending ~~me~~ ² an emissary."

"An emissary? What emissary, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Yes, your emissary! Cruells!"

I pricked up my ears.

X "I don't know what you're ~~raving~~ ^{talking} about."

"And nonetheless, it was you to pointed him out to me the night before Christmas when we were coming back from that walk."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. It was you who noticed that light in the church, you who whispered, 'Let's go in. I'm sure Cruells is in there saying his prayers, and you'll see: he'll be so absorbed that he won't even notice us.' You took me in there, and I have to admit it was striking to see Cruells so absorbed, so alone, in that cold, dark church. Yes, it made an impression on me. I found it very moving. What I didn't realize at the time was that the two of you had cooked up that Christmas pageant to make an impression on me so that a few days later you could send him as an emissary. Because when he came from Villar that day and I saw him, I felt like having a long talk, but it wasn't me who'd sent for him. He'd come of his own volition. You and Picó had gone off to no man's land; what a coincidence . . .

Afterward, when Cruells had made me sit through his entire edifying sermon, I understood everything. What a disgusting scheme! Yes, then I understood why you were so eager to get me into that church on Christmas Eve, to get me to watch him praying. He played his part so well, he seemed so absorbed in his prayers, as though he hadn't realized that we were there and were watching him . . . tears even streamed down

his cheeks . . . what an actor . . . it's revolting . . ."

"None of this is true! You're raving. You're imagining horrible things, Trini. Please, come back to your senses. Try to get yourself under control."

"Everything was planned perfectly to get me to swallow his sermon. A cunning trap, I must admit. I fell in feet first! I heard him out to the bitter end."

"You don't know what you're saying, Trini. I don't know what sermon you're talking about. I don't know anything about this; I don't understand what you're driving at. But what I do know . . . What you can be sure of . . . Yes, you can be sure; if you and Soleràs ever . . . if you ever went with another . . ."

"What?"

"If you ever . . ."

"Don't come near me! If you touch me I'll scream!"

I heard a slap. I knocked on the door.

Trini's eyes were red. The boy's fever hadn't abated. He amused himself by lying in bed, drawing figures in his sketchbook, unable to understand what his parents had been quarreling about. Lluís was staring out the window.

"Make me an outlaw," Ramonet said, "and a house with a front door so the outlaw can go inside and come back out again."

I sat down at his bedside with some knissors and cardboard. "My mommy's naughty," the boy whispered. "She hits my daddy like a wicked stepmother."

what do you think
"How ~~does he look to you?~~" Trini asked.

"He still has a fever, but it's nothing serious. The flu's running its course. You know any little thing will give ~~a kid~~ *hide* a temperature."

But I felt vaguely uneasy. I thought I noticed something in the boy's appearance that didn't go with a case of flu. His voice in particular had surprised me. It had changed much more than ~~was~~^{is} ordinary. It wasn't that it was hoarse or that he'd partly or entirely lost it, as is common in colds. His voice sounded odd, but I didn't know what to attribute it to, given my limited knowledge of medicine. I decided to go straight back to Villar and ~~to forget about~~^{to leave} my friends, who'd expected me to have supper with them and stay the night as I so often did. I wanted to talk to the doctor right away.

As soon as I entered our first-aid station, I heard, at the other end of the basement, as though from a great distance, the muffled notes of "Voi che sapete" played on the violin. He'd brought out his old violin the day after his wife had left. Apparently she couldn't stand even the sight of it. He played for hours on end, alone in that basement, sitting in a beat-up armchair we'd found in some attic and installed next to the wood stove. He played without a score; he had an amazing memory for music. Within reach, on a little table on the other side of the stove, he always kept a bottle of Fundador. He played the violin and drank for hours on end, ever since he'd found himself without Mercedes while the wife of the ~~captain~~^{major}--his great drinking buddy--was still in Villar. Moreover, Major Rosich couldn't bear Chopin or Mozart, being among the most fanatical Wagnerians I've ever met. One morning when Doctor Puig and I were alone in the basement and he was playing "Cherubino alla vittoria" while I sang along with him (he often had me sing arias while he played them), the major came downstairs in his socks so we wouldn't hear him, tiptoed up to the first-aid station, and flung a hand grenade at us. Of course he didn't fling it right at us, but it landed pretty close, in a corner where we piled empty bottles. The din from the exploding grenade and shattering glass

X ^{made} ~~echoed~~ off the stone vaults ^{rubble} as though they were about to cave in. The major ran back upstairs, shouting that he'd do it every time we didn't "play Wagner like everyone else." The doctor replied with the same word Cambronne had used at Waterloo. Practical jokes like that were our daily bread and we hardly noticed them.

X My chief was so alcoholized by that time that all he needed was one slug of cognac (he'd drink it straight out of the bottle) to be tipsy from ^{the} morning on. That was what he drank to achieve, that state of excitement. He'd reached the point where without alcohol--as he himself put it--he felt unable to do anything. "When I wake up," he said, "I feel crushed by the weight of the universe. This lasts till my first swig of cognac revives me." I'm a witness to the fact that he played most beautifully, with the greatest inspiration, when he'd achieved a state of total inebriation. I've often wondered, over the years, how a man so refined, good-hearted, and talented could destroy himself with alcohol. I'm convinced that without that vice, which made him good for nothing, he could have become an excellent doctor, one of the best in Barcelona. What I pieced together from his comments was that he'd been one of those devil-may-care student types--of whom there are so many--who only worry about having a good time and then can't adjust to the monotonous, prosaic demands of adult life. He'd met Merceditas, attired in a sumptuous evening gown, at a dazzling ball thrown by the pork butchers' association on January 17, 1923: Saint Anthony of Egypt's Eve (he's their patron saint). I recall this date so clearly because it was the most important in his life and he often reminded me of it. He found himself married to her, madly in love, when he was well over thirty--fifteen years older than she was--but still hadn't managed to establish himself in his profession. He'd completed his studies quite a while before, but he'd carried on with the gay bachelor life he'd

led in his student days. He hadn't built up a good practice. Since his wife was rich, he slipped into living off her, but his carefree attitude hid a shameful feeling of failure. Perhaps it was in order to escape this feeling that he'd enlisted as a doctor in the Catalan army right at the beginning of the war. At least that's what he implied with that banal phrase he repeated so often, "I joined the army in order to find a little peace." In any case, I believe that besides dissatisfaction at being a professional failure, something else was troubling him.

Something else was eating him, but what? There was another dissatisfaction, but this one was murkier, harder to grasp and to put into words. If I spoke of his failure as a husband, everyone would understand me and nonetheless I wouldn't have said anything precise. I believe that, despite what Trini said--and I should mention that Picó shared her suspicions, but Picó was overly cynical about such matters and didn't deserve to be taken too seriously--~~Merceditas~~ ~~Merceditas~~ had always been faithful to him and that aside from being a birdbrain, was an irreproachable wife and mother, entirely devoted to her husband and children. I even believe that when she had seemed to flirt with Lluís, this had been caused by her very innocence: that is, that since her intentions had been pure she hadn't bothered to conceal anything. Lluís once confessed to me that he'd never met "such an insipid woman," and this despite the fact that it was hard for him to find any woman insipid if she was attractive. What I suspect, when I think about it, is that Doctor Puig suffered from a kind of frustration that was hard for me to understand at the time and that wasn't only caused by what he called Merceditas's "frigidity" (because he'd sometimes taken the "intimate secrets" he shared with me to this extreme). No; if it were only that, it would all have been straightforward. But what do I know about these subtle cracks into which a man can fall? In any

case, frigidity was what he complained of when he declared so picturesquely that she'd never cuckolded him; quite the contrary. Beneath this stupid expression, I thought I glimpsed a painful frustration, but God ^{only} ~~only knows what a~~ ^{understands of the} tangle of contradictions and complexities ~~is~~ ^{it} inside each one of us. The only thing I know, and this I can swear to, is that never, ~~not even in his drunken moments, did he ever~~ ^{not even in his drunken moments, did he} speak about any other woman; he always talked, with piercing, obsessive sorrow, about Merceditas, as though she were the only woman in the universe.

That day I'd gone to Santa Espina and come back in the Ford, which the major had lent me on account of Ramonet's illness. Night had fallen by the time I returned. As I've said, he was playing the violin all alone. On the table, beside the eternal bottle of cognac, a candle burned. He stopped playing and turned his drunken gaze in my direction.

"I thought you were going to spend the night in Santa Espina."

"Ramonet's fever has gotten worse," I interrupted him. "There's something odd about him. His voice doesn't sound normal."

"He's got tonsillitis. It's so common it's hardly worth mentioning. Tonsillitis"--and so saying, he grabbed the bottle and drank a swig--"It's tonsillitis. Too bad the kid can't take a good dose of this. It's ideal for tonsillitis!"

"Ramonet has no tonsils."

"What do you mean? I saw them; they're inflamed. It's so common I didn't attach any importance to it. Just an ordinary sore throat."

And he changed the subject. He was so certain that he'd seen those inflamed tonsils that he didn't pay any attention to what I was saying. He whistled, hummed to himself, and talked about Merceditas.

"Ever since she left, I dream of her every night. I try to drown my sorrows in cognac; see what I mean?"

"We have to talk about Ramonet," I insisted.

"Wait a minute," he replied. "Leave Ramonet out of this. Don't start in about Ramonet. We'll get around to him. Right now I want to tell you an 'intimate secret.' Only one, and I promise it'll be the last. I'll never tell you another, you can rest assured."

He was well in his cups that evening. I could tell from the dull, wandering, glazed look in his eyes, his inability to follow a train of thought. He jumped from one subject to another.

"I don't know if I ever mentioned a certain birthmark, of which Merceditas is justifiably proud. But since she's got it into her head that she's hypersensitive and her nerves are bad, she can't go to bed without first drinking a cup of lime-flower tea laced with a few knockout drops. 'I'm very high-strung,' she says. ~~I can't do it without the cocaine~~ 'I'd be lost without my sleeping medicine.' But I can assure you that it's quite the contrary: one of the clearest cases of female frigidity ever known. Now, if you add lime-flower tea and knockout drops to that . . . if you pour lime-flower tea onto frigidity . . . oof, it's the North Pole, let me tell you!"

"I assure you that Ramonet doesn't have tonsils. His mother had them removed over a year ago. I know that for a fact. I beg you, Doctor Puig: listen to me."

"We weren't talking about tonsils; we were talking about birthmarks. A guy I'd studied with, and a psychiatrist to boot, once advised me to try and take my mind off it. 'You've got a birthmark complex,' he said. 'That's for sure,' I replied. 'You have to get over it.' 'I'd love to, but how should I go about it?' 'Well . . . with other women.' With other women! What nonsense! For me, there's no woman but Merceditas! I'm telling you, Cruells: psychiatrists are a bunch of charlatans . . ."

It was impossible to get him to pay attention to Ramonet's case. He

was bringing the bottle toward his mouth again when I snatched it out of his hand.

"I beg you, Doctor Puig. Make an effort and listen to me. Ramonet can't possibly have tonsillitis because he doesn't have tonsils."

"He doesn't have tonsils? Then he's a freak. All children are born with tonsils."

He'd risen from the armchair and he was groping around in the cabinet, trying to find the bottle I'd hidden among the medicines. I managed to slip a bottle of cough syrup into his hand.

"Husbands should stick together, have more team spirit. It was a dirty trick for Lluís, who belongs to the club, to try and make time with Merceditas. 'Husbands of nitwits, unite!' should be our slogan. That's what Soleràs used to say. He also used to say, if you remember, that the two fronts ought to get together and clean up the mess in the two rears, and if you ask me, that was a damned good idea! But why is this cognac so sweet and thick? It's making me cough like the devil"--and in fact he did suddenly have a coughing fit that left him hoarse--. "The two fronts hmmmmm . . . what's the matter with this Fundador? Before it was a marvelous fascist cognac. Now I feel like spitting it out. Has it joined the republican ~~ranks~~?"

He stumbled over his violin, which he'd left on the floor. It gave out a loud groan that sounded almost human. He suddenly stopped his drunken babble. He stood there in silence, staring at me, as though he'd abruptly begun to grasp the situation.

"Were you saying something about Ramonet?"

"He doesn't have tonsils!" I screamed. "For the simple reason that his mother had them taken out over a year ago! I know because she told me!"

"Don't shout so loud. I can hear you. He doesn't have tonsils . . ."

"His mother told me about it a while ago," I lied, since I knew it not because she'd told me but from reading her letters. "They took them out at the beginning of the war. Please pay attention to what I'm saying. Make an effort, I beg you in the name of whatever you hold dearest, in the name of God who's listening to us! There's no other doctor anywhere near here!"

He stared and stared at me out of his drunken eyes, as though a vague terror were creeping over him. He stared at me in silence. Now his eyes expressed fear, as though he were imagining something dreadful. He collapsed in the armchair.

"Oof," he said, "are you sure? He doesn't have tonsils?"

A tense silence. Then he added, looking down, "Those swellings I casually took to be his tonsils . . ."

He hesitated before uttering the word, "Diphtheria."

"Diphtheria?" I exclaimed. "That's impossible! There's not another kid for miles around. How could he have caught that?"

"The cow," was his only reply.

Picó, shortly before the women had arrived, had in fact brought back a cow from no man's land, along with two calves. "Fresh milk," he had triumphantly announced. The acquisition of that cow was celebrated with all the joy such an opportune occurrence deserved: thanks to that cow, the women and children would have plenty of fresh milk during their stay.

X ~~Trigging~~ ^{Fucking} Picó, with a bee in his bonnet about fresh milk," he soliloquized. "Was it Napoleon or that Borgia pope who bathed in milk every morning? Yes, now I'm sure of it: that cow had diphtheria. You remember how it slobbered, how much trouble it had breathing? God damn it, I'm not a veterinarian! You can't know everything! It seems to me one of the calves wheezed too. I couldn't observe it long since we roasted it

and fell upon it like a bunch of cannibals."

"Diphtheria's very dangerous."

"It used to be. Now there's a serum"--and as though suddenly tranquilized by the idea of that serum, he continued in a cheerful tone, "It's one disease that's been conquered by science."

Every day in every way,

Progress marches on.

He hummed and winked at me, overcome by a strange wave of euphoria, "Today, diphtheria is nothing more than a memory, Cruells! I haven't the slightest doubt that that cow was diphtheritic. Unfortunately, I didn't pay enough attention to her. After all, one can't be everywhere at once! And then she died, taking her secret to the grave."

"But are you sure the boy . . ."

"Now I am; absolutely positive! It's well known that those membranes like growths sometimes look like tonsils. If you auscultated Ramonet-- something I stupidly neglected to do--you'd hear a wheezing noise from the air trying to get past those growths."

He glanced at me astutely out of his bleary eyes, and I could see he was making a great effort to think straight.

"Before the serum, you know, those growths would end up blocking respiration. Kids choked to death. There were also some who pulled through. Everything's possible. They were crippled for life. What a filthy profession medicine is: nothing but death and deformity."

"We'll have to warn Lluís."

"Bah, Cruells. Why should we upset him? Today diphtheria's no big deal. Less dangerous than a case of flu! There's a serum. We live in the age of science. What you'll do is take the Ford and head straight for Barcelona."

Two days later, I sent Doctor Puig a telegram from Barcelona that had to cover the last lap on our field telephone from Villar: "No serum in republican territory."

VIII

I scoured Barcelona, from the Holy Cross Hospital to Saint Paul's Hospital, from the army medical corps headquarters to the ministry of health. Then I visited all the private clinics. The head of one of them, after listening to me, silently led me into a room where a three-year-old girl was lying in bed. She must have once been pretty, with her pale chestnut hair and big dark eyes. But by that time . . .

Her parents sat by the bedside, quietly listening to her wheezing as she tried to breathe with a blocked larynx.

"She sounds like a locomotive," her father muttered.

X At that time we still had steam locomotives. The man's face expressed the befuddlement we feel when faced with absurd situations. The mother sat stiffly, as though frozen. ~~I thought she was~~ ^{She seemed} lost in prayer, but when she noticed me and the chief standing beside her, she said without moving or looking up at us, "Out of all the children on earth, why did it have to be ours?"

"Are you going to let this girl die?" I asked once we were back in his office.

"I can't work miracles."

He was a wiry, energetic-looking man some fifty years old, graying at the temples and with the air of someone who suffers from liver trouble.

X "I can't work miracles. They've ordered us to hide it, not to tell anyone, but I don't want to deceive you: there's no serum in republican territory. I even asked the minister. We're friends; we were students together. There was nothing he could do. You won't find it anyplace! Don't waste your time looking for it. ~~What a~~ ^{What a} bunch of bastards!"

As I left, I found myself in pitch darkness. The searchlights on

2X Montjuïc cut
Montjuïc across those from Tibidabo, and that cross of light ^{was} reflected
off the low rain clouds in the sky. They couldn't find the planes, which
X were flying so high that I could ^{barely} ~~hardly~~ hear their humming. There had
X been bombing raids the past three nights.

I ~~walked~~ ^{stumbled} through that thick darkness, where hundreds of other ghosts
groped along. Traffic had come to a standstill; one could only move on
foot. As I cut across some vacant lots along the street, I heard trains
passing, invisible in the darkness. At times I felt like a piece of flotsam;
at other moments I seemed to be walking across the body of a dying
giant. The planes were bluebottle flies that had come to lay their eggs on
a city that, though still alive, had begun to smell like a rotting corpse.

I wandered down broad avenues in total darkness, bumping into
telephone poles or plunging into piles of garbage that gave off a strangely
sweet smell. I felt a piercing grief, because that motionless mother's face
came back to me and I realized that she hadn't been praying; she'd been
in shock. Her unblinking gaze accused the entire universe. Did it also
accuse God? Weren't the Virgin Mary's eyes at the foot of the cross
equally shocked and unblinking . . . and I thought, "Not even the minister!
But these are strange times. Everyone says so. They say there are people
X with much more power than ministers. They say the ^{Spanish} ~~republican~~ and Catalan
governments don't count for anything . . . That's what everyone says. Why
not give it a try? After all, he's his uncle!"

And I found myself in the great man's waiting room without knowing
how I'd gotten there. The great man came out and led me into his office,
past those who'd arrived before me, putting his arm around my shoulder in
a broad, protective gesture.

It was a luxurious office, worthy of a great man. I felt lost there. He
was young, handsome, dark, cordial, optimistic, energetic, and important.

His black eyes shone with tenderness that softened his aggressive manner. It was well known that he was easily moved to tears during his speeches, something that--along with the inflections and tremolos he gave his voice--had contributed enormously to his success. He had a powerful baritone voice, a voice that could harangue or quiver with emotion as the occasion warranted. "Here's the great man," I kept thinking, "here I am at last with the great man himself." This was the first time I'd seen him, the first time I'd entered his office. The walls were adorned with his most celebrated masterpieces: "Build tanks," "The battle of the eggs," "And you? What have you done to help?" and dozens and dozens of other immense, gaudy, eye-catching posters. At the moment I entered, two young men in impeccable uniforms had just spread a new poster on an enormous table. It depicted a boy about four or five years old in a republican soldier's uniform cheerfully aiming a submachine gun. The great man smiled at me condescendingly. He listened to me and replied while examining that new poster and giving instructions to his subordinates: "Make this red brighter. When they print it, have them use the reddest ink possible . . ." He smelled of cologne, and his elegant uniform, half military and half civilian, was made of the finest wool. Once he'd checked that new poster, he led me over to his desk.

"I'm always so busy . . . but I'm listening."

As he spoke, he kept opening letters and telegrams and consulting statistics and memos. Yes, he was very busy, crushed beneath the burden of his enormous responsibilities, but he addressed everyone as "tu," and his duties didn't prevent him from being a friend and comrade to anyone who came to see him. He called me "comrade Cruells" and "tu" as though we'd known each other all our lives, when it was actually the first time we'd met. Every time he called me by my last name he had to glance discreetly

at the datebook where his orderly had written it down, along with the purpose of my visit and how many minutes it would probably last.

"He's my nephew, as you know, and yet I can do nothing for him. For him and for thousands of workers' children! It's painful, Comrade Cruells"--he'd momentarily laid aside his documents, figures, and telegrams and fixed his warmest, most heartfelt gaze on me--"very painful indeed. I've sacrificed my entire life for the proletariat, yet I can do nothing to save these future workers who suffer from diphtheria. There's no serum! Our borders are closed, the foreign powers have abandoned us, we have so many problems! I'm working myself to death, as you can see, but we receive nothing from abroad. Nothing! Neither fertilizer for our peasants nor feed for our livestock nor sulphur for our chemical plants . . . I'm a chemist, Comrade Cruells, and I could show you statistics from these past few weeks: production's fallen precipitously . . ."

"All I'm asking for is a little diphtheria serum," I muttered.

"But comrade, didn't I just tell you we're receiving absolutely nothing [?] ~~at the moment.~~ France has closed the border. The fascists sink any ship that tries to approach our shores. The outside world shuns us like the plague. It's one of the greatest tragedies in history. These small, personal tragedies pale by comparison. Our struggle is on a cosmic scale. We have to accept our private misfortunes, which are the price we must pay to redeem the workers of the world. He's my nephew, as you know, and I can't help crying"--and in fact the great man's magnificent eyes glistened tearfully and his seductive baritone voice trembled slightly--"but we have to behave like men, conquer our weaknesses, sacrifice our selfish interests, see the big picture!" His voice was now energetic, heroic. "This is my advice to all comrades: never mind what may happen to each comrade in particular and ~~only~~ ^I look at what will happen to the proletariat in general.

X I don't know if you comrades at the front realize what dangers we brave
in the rear. It's lucky ~~that~~² we're here, looking out for your interests.

While you face the enemy in battle, fifth columnists would stab you in the back if we weren't heroically protecting you. You should know that right now, we're facing a grave danger in Barcelona: a clerical conspiracy. Yes, some of the conspirators have brazenly demanded that we open the

X And incredible as it may sound, among them are certain ministers in the Catalan and ~~republican~~^{Spanish} governments. I can see from the look on your face that you don't believe me; well, it's true. This conspiracy exists. Luckily, we're tirelessly defending your interests. Open the churches again? All our heroism would be for nought! Our sacrifices, the rivers of blood we shed! All in vain! But never fear, comrades at the front. Never fear, Comrade Cruells. We're here, ready to face any threat . . ."

Comrade Cruells, Comrade Cruells . . . I felt a vast, obscure desire to weep and to urinate.

IX

X I pulled Lluís aside. He couldn't ~~understand~~^{grasp} what I was saying.

"You're joking of course."

He glared at me. "So the great Llibert . . ." He grabbed my arm and yanked me along toward the outskirts of Santa Espina. The snow had begun to melt; my boots sank into the mud. We reached the barn where they kept that famous cabriolet. He hitched up the mule without saying a word.

"What are you planning to do?"

"Get in."

With one crack of his whip, he set the animal galloping toward that deserted valley. Did he think we'd find diphtheria serum in one of the abandoned villages? Aside from shouts and curses to urge on the mule, he said nothing during the entire trip. He constantly cracked his whip, which sliced through the air with a sound like ripping cloth. He only spoke to me once, in a voice choked by hatred, "So the great Llibert . . . our brilliant comrade . . ."

The dirt road turned upward for a mile or so. When we reached the top, where we could see the next valley--no man's land--the mule, unnerved by Lluís's curses, started downward in a kind of cavalry charge. It was a wonder the old carriage didn't fly apart on that rocky road. In less than an hour we reached Cruyllas, beyond Nogueras. I'd never ventured so far into that valley. In fact, I hadn't been there in months, ever since the major had announced that only Lluís and Picó were authorized to visit it. The woods began a little past that village. Amid the trees, halfway up the mountain, barbed wire glittered in the setting sun.

We'd left the mule and cabriolet in the square outside the church and

were walking silently down the main street.

Far from showing the effects of war, the village was intact. Though it had never been burned or bombarded, its inhabitants had fled after finding themselves between two armies and so close to the fascist lines. That deserted village was far more ghostly than Villar and Santa Espina. The setting sun reflected on its snow-covered roofs like honey on a slice of bread, and the streets smelled like a big empty house. Intact and empty, it was eerie, like a living body without a soul. This eerie effect was enhanced by the brilliant white houses, even the humblest ones, as though their inhabitants had whitewashed them just before the battles that would force them to flee ~~had started.~~

We left the village behind us and started up the hill toward the barbed wire. Lluís strode along as fast as he could and it was hard for me to keep up with him. After a quarter of an hour walking amid box trees and kermes oaks, he motioned me to stop. We were a hundred yards from the barbed wire.

"Don't be afraid," he said. "We stole their cow, but they're forgiving types."

Bells of all shapes and sizes hung from the wires, and the stakes were topped with the skulls of goats and men. I'd seen skulls like those before, white and polished as marble. Our soldiers, like the fascists, would collect those they found--in places where there had been battles months before--and stick them on top of stakes. I don't think they did it to make fun of them; quite the contrary. It was a kind of homage to those unknown casualties--friends or foes. An outlandish homage if you will, even one hard to understand, but I believe this was their intention. The novelty this time consisted in those goats' skulls interspersed with human ones, something I'd never seen before. Beneath each skull was a sign

nailed to the stake: "Forty centuries look down at you from the height of these pyramids," and other historic phrases. I still hadn't grasped--though I was beginning to suspect--why Lluís had brought me there, and I gaped in amazement at those goat skulls and signs. He, on the other hand, acted as though he'd seen it all before.

"Those are his ideas," he said.

"Though we may die, we never surrender," said another of those signs. The stakes cast long shadows in the setting sun's slanting rays, while the skulls seemed to grin. I found one that was very small, like a toy, and must have belonged to an infant. It also had a sign: "Suffer little children to come unto me."

#

Lluís, cupping his gloved hands together, began to shout. Since no one answered, he started shaking the wires. Some of the skulls fell off, while the bells tinkled grotesquely. Strange as it may seem, no one appeared. We could have cut the wires and attacked. He stood in the light so they could see him, screaming and jingling those bells frantically. Hiding among the bushes, I yelled out to him, afraid that at any moment he'd be mowed down by machine gun fire. He didn't even hear me.

Finally four soldiers appeared in ragged uniforms and with bleary eyes, obviously annoyed at being awakened. Lluís shouted to them in Castilian that he wanted to speak with their lieutenant. One of the four went off and came back a while later with another man as ragged as the first bunch. Two little gold stars glittered on his fur-lined overcoat.

It was Soleràs.

"There's no serum!" Lluís shouted. "You hear me? Cruells will explain . . . I don't understand it; a cure for diphtheria . . ."

I'd remained a few paces away, calmer though not entirely at my

ease. We were still two against five. Lluís motioned to me to approach. I stayed where I was.

"Now you want serum?" Soleràs asked. "Aren't you capricious! You ask for the weirdest things. Who do you want it for? For your latest doxy, like that cologne? Has the doctor's wife got diphtheria?"

"There's not a drop of it in republican territory. Cruells will explain. It's for Ramonet!"

Soleràs stared at him in astonishment.

"What's Ramonet doing here?"

"It's quieter here than in Barcelona. Ever since your pals started bombing . . ."

"You mean to say . . ." Soleràs couldn't get over his shock. "You mean to say Trini's with you too? You had her come with the doctor's wife? She and Ramonet? You're crazy! Get them out of here immediately! Something bad could happen to them!"

X "I'm not asking ^{for} your advice."

^ "Something bad could happen to them," Soleràs repeated.

A gusty wind had blown up and kept me from hearing everything they said. I watched them gesticulate and open and shut their mouths, and when the wind died down I heard them again.

"Something bad could happen to them!" Soleràs repeated for the second time, now yelling into the wind. "Get them out of here right away, before tomorrow!"

"I didn't come here to receive orders."

"And you think I'm the crazy one! You'll force me to tell you . . . I'll tell you later. First let's talk about the cow. You'd promised not to swipe her. You went back on your word."

"Fuck the cow. This is no time to bring that up."

"I can see you're a generous soul, Lluís. You forgive me for the cows you steal from me as magnanimously as you forgive the slaps you give me."

"Listen, this is no time to talk about slaps . . ."

"You think I'm a miracle worker? You think I manufacture diphtheria serum here in the trenches? What do you think I make it from: dried shit?"

"You jackass, if you think . . . If we can't find any serum, the doctor'll have to stick a red-hot poker down his throat!"

Doctor Puig had told us that before the serum was invented, they'd tried to burn away the growths with scalding water "or better yet, with red-hot pokers. You can see it in one of Goya's paintings: at the time, it was the only way to keep kids from dying of asphyxiation . . . Goya painted it all, absolutely everything!" At that moment the wind began to gust more fiercely, and for a while I couldn't hear a thing.

"You're always the same: when you want something, you go after it without stopping to think. That's why you're such a hit with women . . . Why didn't you tell me Trini was in Santa Espina?"

"Why do you think? After that packet of letters . . . Hell, let's not talk about that now; this isn't the time! I'd belt you like the other day and right now I don't want to. That's not what I came for. Forget about it!"

X From what they were saying, I gathered that some weeks before Lluís had ~~slapped~~ ^{struck} Soleràs . . . Why? I never found out. I never had another chance to talk to either of them about it, and now, so many years later, it doesn't make any difference to me. But I have a feeling that it wasn't over Trini and those letters but on account of some crack Soleràs had made about Merceditas, since as I'd just discovered, it was Soleràs who obtained the bottles of cologne and packs of Camels Lluís passed on to

her. That was why he knew of her existence, but this wasn't what worried me during those tense moments.

"Come closer. I'll tell you a secret that'll be just between you and me. I don't want Cruells to hear. Yes, a secret. They could shoot me for telling you, but I'll tell you anyway."

"What about this barbed wire?"

"Don't be so impatient. There's a gap, the same one we used to milk the cow. You steal our cows and you still expect us to . . ."

He disappeared and then reappeared an instant later on our side of the wire. His four soldiers, tired of waiting for that incomprehensible conversation in Catalan to end, had lain down on the ground and seemed to be asleep. Soleràs was now whispering in Lluís's ear, and from the look on his face as he listened, I could see he was surprised at what he heard.

"Well, what did you expect?" Soleràs asked aloud. "Did you think this would last forever?"

"You yourself once told me there'd never be action on this front."

"And you believed me? You're a bigger fool than I thought. Men always turn out to be bigger fools than they seem; women, on the other hand . . ."

They started whispering again. Suddenly Lluís exclaimed, "You mean she's a spy?"

"If you want to put it that way . . . Me, I couldn't care less! She's trying to look out for herself; that's all I can tell you. She's got more on the ball than you and me and all of us combined. Broads like her have it in their blood. We can't keep up with them! Of course she had to be ready for a possible change. A spy? What does that mean? All she wants is her castle and ~~its~~ ^{her} estates; she doesn't give a hoot about anything else! And besides, the change will be just what she needs, everything she's ever

dreamed of! As if all she had to do was put out a pot and partridges would fall into it, already plucked. Maybe you don't know Cagorcio died not long ago in a skirmish."

"Trini will never go along with it."

"You don't have any imagination," Soleràs replied. "Of course she'll go along if Ramonet's life is at stake. And even if it weren't, are you such a fool as to think she and Olivela wouldn't like to get to know each other . . . Even if the kid weren't around, Trini would be delighted, 'delighted to make your acquaintance, madam.' It's incredible how little you know about women. You can be sure both of them are dying to meet each other. They're women; nosiness is in their blood. And besides, there's the kid. That's nothing to be trifled with! 'Suffer little children to come unto me.' I assume that sounds familiar to you; I assume you saw the sign . . ."

Soleràs took a deep breath, as though trying to fill his lungs, and then bellowed as loud as he could, "The whole universe isn't worth the life of one little child!"

And without transition, he continued in the most normal of tones, "Cagorcio's another story. He never trusted anyone. His death is a murky business; one of those deaths that stink to high heaven. An enemy bullet? Of course! Any bullet that enters your head is by definition an enemy bullet, and even more if it enters the back of your head. I can guarantee that he was shot in the back of the neck. Believe me, this dame doesn't miss a trick! You're an innocent; you think they're less novelistic than they really are. She'll do everything necessary because she's grateful to you. You did her a big favor, but she doesn't hold a grudge. It's the first time I've seen generosity taken to such limits. She's magnanimous. And more attached to that castle than ever, determined to hang onto it no

X matter what! She'll end up owning the entire district. People already talk about her in tones of hushed mystery, 'A great lady, ^{sole survivor} ~~heiress~~ to one of the oldest families in Aragon, daughter of a hero and wife of a martyr.' A legend's growing up around her. What? That doesn't matter now? You don't care about Olivela? All you care about is that diphtheria serum? My dear fellow . . . You still don't understand what I'm talking about! I'll make sure it's at Olivela's house by the time you arrive. Is that clear enough? Not everyone who wants to be a legend can be one, believe me. And with a little legend you can go far nowadays. They're the ones who'll divide the pie. Us soldiers? Phooey! Everyone'll shun us like the plague. You're letting them play you for a sucker, Lluís, the same as I am. Yes, exactly the same, because try as one may, it's not so easy to become an unscrupulous bastard . . . Far from it! You have to work at it, like anything else."

He no longer bothered to whisper, as though he'd forgotten I was there. Lluís said something I couldn't hear, and he shot back, "The cow? So she had diphtheria! Well, that's not my fault. How could I have imagined you'd steal her or that Ramonet was with you . . . Let's not discuss it. Forget about it; may the old dear rest in peace! After all, what can you expect from a cow? She, on the other hand, will go far. She's just hitting her stride! Life begins at fifty for dames like her."

"Fifty? You're crazy!"

"You never can get these broads' ages straight! Using the excuse that I needed it to make sure her marriage in articulo mortis would still be valid if the worm turned, I asked her a few weeks ago to send me her baptismal certificate. She was born in 1888, an easy date to remember. Count it up on your fingers if you can't do it any other way. You'll find she's just turned fifty, a nice round number, because she was born on

March first. Life begins at fifty for dames like her! You'll hear plenty about her. She's just started! It's not so easy getting to be a martyr's widow . . . Some husbands refuse to go along; you have to give them a little shove from behind. Llibert will go far too. He's no chump, let me tell you, the great Llibert! Our brilliant comrade! What? Of course he is! The same as her! I never mentioned it because I assumed you already figured . . . Damned right! What did you expect? What? You don't believe me? Listen, pal: you've never believed me! 1888 is an easy year to remember. The first Barcelona world's fair! The big attraction was the captive balloon. People lined up to go inside it . . . What? You'll never believe Olivela was born back in Rius i Taulet's time? Well, I swear it. I saw her baptismal certificate! It's not my fault you never believe me. And I'll tell you another prophesy you'll remember a few years from now: it's people like her who'll divide the pie. Not you and I! We've swallowed too much dirt, eaten too much carrion, scratched too much scabies. Trench life leaves a mark you can't erase. Everyone will avoid us. Our brilliant comrade Llibert, on the other hand . . . if I told you that from now on . . . You've never believed my prophesies. Time will change your mind. When you see the showcases on the Ronda de Sant Antoni full of furniture in the style of Isabella II . . . yes, I've told you several times before: once the war's over, that stuff is going to be all the rage! What does furniture have to do with war? How should I know? All I do is prophesy! Furniture in the style of Isabella II and Eugeni d'Ors's complete works! Yes, once the war's over you'll see Eugeni d'Ors's complete works all over the place. You'll find them in your soup! Why are you looking at me like that? Didn't you ever hear of Eugeni d'Ors? He has nothing to do with diphtheria? But listen: we can't spend our whole lives talking about diphtheria. I'm talking about Eugeni d'Ors, god damn it!"

#

When we got back to Santa Espina, Lluís had a talk behind closed doors with Picó. Then he started packing. I helped him. Trini wept uncontrollably.

X "They'll ~~shut their~~ ^{look the other way} eyes," said Picó, who'd just made a call on our field telephone. "They'll put you down as missing. But get a move on."

Trini, holding the child bundled up in her arms, climbed in the cabriolet. Lluís embraced Picó.

"You know I'll never . . ." He didn't finish his sentence, perhaps afraid of saying something corny. With one leap he was in the carriage and had seized the reins. Picó and I had gone out to see them off, but he didn't even look at us. Neither did Trini, who was wrapped in a big blanket and held the boy against her chest. The cabriolet set off at a furious clip and disappeared around the first bend.

I stayed the night at Santa Espina.

X A tremendous din ^Twoke me the next morning shortly before dawn. It was March 9, 1938.

The enemy had opened fire with its artillery along the entire front occupied by our brigade and those to the north and south of us. At least that's what it seemed like from one of our lookouts. Picó had hardly slept. He'd spent the night preparing and talking on the phone with the major. He'd loaded his machine guns on mules and taken them up a nearby mountain along with his entire company. He'd told me to go ahead and sleep and head for Villar at daybreak and report to my lieutenant. But instead of taking the path to Villar I'd made for that mountaintop.

I found him on one of those peaks we called lookouts. From there, we could see puffs of smoke along our front lines all the way to the horizons to our north and south. The bombardment seemed heaviest to our

south, supported by squads of planes that flew overhead, more numerous as day broke.

"They're bombing the Flatfoot Brigade," he said in a strange voice. He wasn't wearing his false teeth.

X An hour later, the major arrived and began watching, through his ~~big~~ ^{field} ~~binoculars~~ ^{glasses}, that barrage aimed at the flatfeet. The doctor and some sergeants and soldiers on his staff had followed him. So far, not a single shell had fallen in our battalion's trenches. It was as if they'd forgotten about us. We looked out at that sinuous line of smoke and dust and heard the booming guns as though they had nothing to do with us.

X Our soldiers called an ultra-high-speed field gun "the loon." It was a novelty at that time and the fascists had just obtained it. The shells weren't very big, but they came almost as thick and fast as machine gun bullets. Needless to say, after leveling the Flatfoot Brigade's fortifications, the air force and the ~~loon~~ ^{loon's} started in on ours. Bombs and shells fell like hail on our trenches. In some places they caved in and the surviving soldiers fled, covered with dirt. The planes flew very low--we had no anti-aircraft guns of any sort--dropping strings of little bombs on us, while big shells sent sacks of earth and stakes flying through the air. They'd finished work by midday.

Our fortifications had been utterly destroyed, our parapets pulverized, our machine gun nests smashed by bombs and shells. Our men still stood their ground, hiding behind whatever they could find: trees, rocks, scattered sacks of earth. They thought that when that infernal artillery stopped and the fascist infantry finally appeared, they'd easily stop it with hand grenades. They'd driven it back so many times before with nothing else!

Now the fire from those "loons" and the squads of bombers moved to

our north. All of a sudden, bombs and shells stopped falling on us. It was the silence that always precedes an infantry attack. We had to take advantage of that pause to collect our wounded. That's what I, the stretcher-bearers, and the doctor were doing when the enemy appeared.

But tanks led the way. A mass of light tanks protected the infantry in its advance. At that time, we didn't even know such tanks existed, able to go up mountainsides. Their appearance took us utterly by surprise.

The men fled in panic . . .

#

I ran along with the others. There was a stimulating odor of damp woods, sweat, and gunpowder. Groups of infantrymen were all around me, fleeing in disarray. Someone near me was shouting, "A field gun took his head off," while another asked, "Did you see all those tanks?" I couldn't find the doctor. I'd gotten lost and no longer knew where the doctor, stretcher-bearers, and wounded were. It was a terrifying rout, a chaotic nightmare. I sat down, overcome by a wish to cry, because I was thinking about one of the wounded men who'd been calling for his mother.

X Suddenly a very small tank appeared in front of me. It had gotten ahead of the others and had ended up lost in those woods. It made its way along a ridge like a caterpillar walking along a branch, very slowly. I stared at it in fascination. It seemed so odd in that spot; as unexpected as a streetcar. It was then that I realized I was alone; it was just me and that armored vehicle. To my right, in a dip, a big almond tree had burst into flower. The tank fired its toy gun and the shell grazed the earth in front of me, ripping up a clump of rosemary, before finally exploding farther away. The tank was now a hundred steps from me. I ran for my life.

I ran and ran till I was out of breath. Then I collapsed on the grass.

"Look at them run," someone said behind me. "It's the tanks that made them panic. But those tanks are no big deal! They're just machines! If we'd stood our ground, we could have knocked them out with hand grenades under their transmissions. If people were better educated . . ."

Without his dentures he looked like a wily old peasant. He was calmly filling his pipe. Then I saw the mules at the bottom of a gully, with the machine guns loaded on them.

"There's not a soul on this mountain," he added after taking a few puffs. "Only the corpses are left. The infantry's stopped trying to cover us. They ran like scared rabbits. It's every man for himself! We'll have to try and make contact with the major, assuming he's . . ."

At that moment we caught sight of some more tanks. Six or seven had suddenly appeared, outlined against the sky. They opened fire on our mules. We had to get out of there.

To find the major . . . that was easier said than done. It was as if the earth had swallowed up our routed battalion. We walked for hours, men and mules, without seeing a soul. Night was about to fall when, near a village called Castelforte, we heard a dull murmur coming from a cave. You'd have thought it was a group of monks saying prayers.

Inside we found the major. He was sitting on the ground, surrounded by his staff and the doctor. A lantern illumined that curious scene. Very curious indeed, since in fact they were saying rosaries while far away, toward the north, we could still hear the artillery.

"Do you know the Ora pro nobis?" was the major's only greeting, and without waiting for our reply, they went on with their prayers.

Picó shoved me out of the cave. He didn't say a word but I could see he was furious. He led me to the top of a ridge where we could see, in the distance far to our south, a line of dust about fifteen miles long. With

my telescope I managed to make out, in the setting sun's last rays, a motorized column in that cloud of dust the dying light had transformed into a fantastic aureole.

It was an endless string of trucks loaded with troops. At that distance, they looked like toys. Toy trucks full of toy soldiers . . . They advanced very slowly.

"This daring advance would cost them dearly if our brigades had any kind of joint plan. It'd be so easy to cut them off! But you can see what they're like: a bunch of drunken ~~idiots~~ ^{fools} . . ."

The major called out to us from the mouth of the cave, "Orders from division headquarters: we have to head for Lomillas!"

Our field telephone was still working, keeping us in touch with the division. Lomillas was a village in the rear, quite far away, that we reached in a single march.

We'd just fallen into a deep sleep when the sound of reveille jolted us awake. Major Rosich, who wanted to have a trench dug before daybreak, climbed to the top of the village steeple to get a good view of the area. The doctor and his two staff secretaries accompanied him. All four of them--major, doctor, and secretaries--stank of rum and were yelling and gesticulating.

I stayed with Picó, who was searching for the best place to mount his machine guns. The sun began to rise. Before us was a plain, with a cloud of dust in the distance.

"The cavalry," said Picó, peering through his binoculars. "If they give us a chance to set up our machine guns, we'll mow them down. It'll be a splendid piece of work!"

He started giving orders. It was already too late. The Moorish cavalry was charging at full speed. Even without binoculars, we could see clearly

that they were Moors. Our men ran for their lives again in a fury of ^{shouts,} ~~cries,~~ dust, confusion, and conflicting orders. Groups of soldiers streaked past and we no longer knew if they were ours or the enemy. I would have run for it too if I hadn't been with Picó, whose presence of mind was contagious. He had us load his machine guns on the mules again, as though his only worry were that he might lose one of them.

The major was nowhere to be seen. Picó and I set out with our mules, assuring each other that he couldn't have stayed in that steeple, since he'd certainly sighted the Moorish cavalry in time. Picó, calm and ^{wily} ~~crafty~~, let his instincts guide him. He found a deep, narrow ravine where we could take cover, far from Lomillas and "out of sight and range." Stray squads of infantrymen straggled in to join us, babbling hysterically and incoherently, "They killed our lieutenant" or "They surrounded us" or "Not one man was left to tell the tale." Picó remained calm. "If they'd surrounded you, you wouldn't be here now." He listened to the disastrous stories those fugitives told as if he already knew all about it and it ^{were} ~~was~~ even part of his plans. He gave curt orders in the most natural tone of voice, and watching and listening to him, you'd have thought he'd foreseen everything long before and found it quite unsurprising. His tranquility was contagious. Just seeing and hearing him transformed those panicked bands, which had been wandering aimlessly, into disciplined, confident fighting men. They let him bawl them out like a schoolteacher and kept swelling our column, which lengthened by the hour. A battalion shattered by panic is as disturbing as an oppressive, feverish dream. Slowly, Picó brought a little order to that chaos. His instinct hadn't deceived him; it never deceived him. That ravine went on and on. It wasn't the blind alley I'd feared. It was a kind of sheltered path, just as he'd intuited. Once we'd reached a spot he liked, he assigned various chores to the hundred or so

men following us and mounted his machine guns.

"We'll have to stop for a while. We've been on the march for twelve hours straight and we didn't sleep last night. But we'll have to earn our rest."

And sure enough, the enemy soon showed up. It couldn't have been more than a reconnaissance patrol, since a skirmish, a little concert played on our machine guns, was enough to get rid of them and let us rest for a few hours.

Picó wanted to continue our retreat as soon as the sun rose.

"We'll find the major in Malluelo," he said. "That's the only place our battalion could possibly regroup."

X There wasn't a living soul in Malluelo, military or civilian. The streets were cluttered with all sorts of objects--including an enormous and surprising ~~electric~~ ^{II} player piano--and the houses stood open, with gaping doors and windows. While we explored them in the hope of finding something to eat, big-caliber shells began falling on the village. Its modest dwellings flew through the air. Picó ordered our men to evacuate despite protests from the soldiers who, tormented by hunger, wanted to keep ransacking those pantries.

As we left the last houses behind us, a soldier in rags and with a crazed look in his eyes ran out of a barnyard and threw himself at Picó's feet.

"Captain! Thank God!" he shouted. "Finally, some familiar faces! I was hiding there, in the dung . . ."

It was one of the secretaries who'd been with the major in that steeple in Lomillas.

"What happened to the major?" asked Picó.

"He's had it!"

"What do you mean he's had it?"

"They finished him off."

He scratched himself furiously as though he'd picked up an entire brigade of ticks and bedbugs in that dunghill.

"Finished him off? Spit it out! Who are you talking about?"

"About the major!"

"Fuck you!" replied Picó, who couldn't abide secretaries and especially this one--a sergeant who'd once been a pillar of the Baby Bottle Club. The man was obviously very distraught. His face was red and his days-old beard was black and bristly.

"They trapped us. They surrounded the village," he went on raving. "Lomillas: you know which village I mean! The cavalry, you know which one, the Moorish cavalry, those sons of bitches . . . What a racket they made! The filthy bastards! I and the other secretary threw ourselves on the floor, but the major stuck his head out and started firing his pistol, along with the doctor. The others fired back with their Mausers from below and the bullets ricocheted off the bells! It sounded like a celebration."

"What happened to the major?"

"He ran out of ammunition."

"And then?"

"He stood in the window"--at that moment, the man managed to extract a huge tick from his hairy chest--"he stood in the window, hanging onto the clapper, and . . ."

A laughing fit suddenly came over him, making it impossible for him to continue. He roared with laughter till tears streamed down his face.

"You jackass: you think this is something to laugh about?"

Despite Picó's insults, the man couldn't stop his convulsive laughter.

He could barely stammer, "Vintage 1902."

Picó stared at him, touching his finger to his head.

"Vintage 1902? What the hell are you talking about?"

"Sauterne, captain! Sauterne, vintage 1902! I swear to God! Since he had no more bullets . . . He kept shouting 'Forty centuries look down at you from the height of these pyramids' till finally he fell from the window, clutching his belly."

Picó stared at me in silence.

"What about the doctor?"

"I don't know what happened to him. Between him and the major, they'd drunk an entire bottle of rum for breakfast. A shell burst in the steeple as I and the other secretary were crawling down the winding staircase that led to the sacristy. We hid in a big cupboard where they used to keep the hosts . . ."

"Shut the fuck up!"

X Night after night, traversing one deserted village after another, what was left of the fourth battalion retreated, following our captain. We had no idea what the general situation was. We didn't know where the other troops in our brigade and our division were. It seemed as though the entire republican army had evaporated and ~~that~~ ² all that remained was that band of a hundred men following us. We gathered that the rout must have been total over a broad stretch of the front. For example, all the bridges were still intact. Other than inconceivable sloppiness, the only possible explanation was that the engineers hadn't had time to blow them up. Our lines must have collapsed all at once.

We guessed that a massive attack must have broken through the Aragonese front at all its weak points, those areas lulled into sloth by long hibernation. That was what we guessed, but we were lost, like a

handful of ants crossing an endless desert. We couldn't find the slightest trace of other units from our army. We marched by night and slept by day. One morning we camped, half dead, outside a town, deserted like all the others, near a very old bridge with a long string of arches. Dawn was breaking and we wanted to sleep for a few hours among the poplars on the river bank. Just as we were drifting off, Picó had the bugle blown.

"A hunch," he whispered to me.

X We walked for half an hour till we reached a pine-covered hill. From there we could see the whole town, the bridge, and the poplars along the banks. The rising sun illumined them obliquely, but the castle and ~~collegiate~~ church, both made of reddish stone, rising up above the rest against a deep blue sky in the west, received the rising sun's rays directly. We'd just lain down among the pines when we heard a buzzing sound, far-off at first but growing steadily louder. We couldn't see them; we only heard them. By now they must have been right overhead.

X Suddenly, a cloud of black smoke rose silently from the bridge, rising higher than the poplars, the town, the castle, and the church. Then we heard explosions. We could no longer see the town, the bridge, and the poplars. Everything was submerged in a black, thick, repulsive cloud.

"They're bombing the exact spot where we were sleeping" was Picó's only comment. Then he went back to sleep.

X The next morning, at daybreak, we set out across a high plateau devoid of vegetation. As we looked for somewhere to take cover before the sun got too high, a "rat"--that's what ^{our} ~~the~~ soldiers called the reconnaissance planes--appeared and circled overhead. "We'll have to find some woods before the fighters arrive," the captain said. They arrived more quickly than we'd expected. There were three of them: more than sufficient, once they started strafing us, to wipe out our hundred men.

X Just at that moment, an east wind blew up, blanketing the plateau with fog. We went on walking for a long time, maybe hours, through that fog which made us invisible and soaked us in a fine, cold drizzle. Not a single man was lost.

X We ate whatever food we could find in those deserted villages. Once we were lucky enough to ~~run into~~ ^{come across} a communal oven full of stale bread, the last they'd baked before the inhabitants had ~~left~~. The houses were always empty. Everyone had fled with whatever he could ~~take with him~~ ^{carry}. There was also the last olive harvest. We found them still beneath the trees, spread out on burlap or in half filled sacks. They were big, tart, black olives, very nourishing.

Then came the steppe. First the mountains had ended, then the woods, then the olive groves. Now we found ourselves crossing a monotonous wasteland, with no other vegetation than occasional clumps of gorse and thyme as far as the eye could see. By day we kept as still as we could beneath the rare shadows that treeless, unchanging terrain afforded. Planes flew overhead without seeing us, so skilled had we become in the art of camouflage. They never would have seen us if it hadn't been for the mules.

Picó was determined to save the mules at any cost--essential for carrying our machine guns and ammunition--as though his very honor depended on it. One midday, when the sun was directly overhead, a squad of planes unexpectedly appeared. We hadn't noticed their buzzing, and when we finally did, they were right above us. I crouched beneath a solitary hawthorn, trying to curl up in a ball so that no part of my body would stick out beyond the shadow, while those in charge of the machine guns forced the mules to lie down in the few other shadows the landscape offered. One of the animals, frightened by the noise from the engines, got

up and began trotting toward my hiding place. It stopped right beside me.

That mule beneath the blazing sun caught the pilots' attention. One of them began turning, followed by the others. They came in low, strafing us, circling and returning over and over again till they finally ran out of ammunition. It lasted a couple of hours, though they seemed like centuries.

While the fascist air force kept trying to hunt us down, it had been days since we'd seen a foot soldier, friend or foe, so that without the constant hum of fighter planes and Junkers we'd have thought we were the only survivors in the entire universe. That steppe went on forever. We didn't march in a straight line but in broad zigzags dictated by Picó's intuitions. For example, we'd march--always at night--north for six hours and then east for four more. The next day, as soon as night fell we'd march five hours south and five east. Sometimes we even marched back the way we'd come, toward the west, without my ever being able to understand how Picó arrived at these strange azimuths. When I asked him, he just shrugged his shoulders. "Hunches," he replied. All I can say is that his instinct never failed him, that he always managed to avoid being trapped, and that he saved those hundred men who'd entrusted their lives to him and obeyed him like a father. From time to time, we'd find all sorts of jettisoned equipment: heliographs, goniometers, and other gadgets whose use we couldn't divine. Often we found piles of unused shells in their shiny brass cases. One day we came across a fifteen-and-a-half-caliber field gun, huge and solitary amid that barren plain.

We passed all that flotsam from our immense shipwreck with scarcely a glance, since of course we couldn't take it with us. Scattered around the field gun, in some cases at a considerable distance, fragments of the gunners' bodies dried out in the sun, apparently blown to bits by a bomb. Not long afterward we spotted a pile of small packages, neatly wrapped in

wax paper, which we might have taken for bars of expensive soap. Picó picked one up.

X "TNT," he said. "This is ^{what} ~~the connection~~ those damned engineers should have used to blow all the bridges sky-high before they retreated, but look at it: they threw it away like it was shit!"

#

A few days after we'd found the TNT, one of the widest rivers in Aragon blocked our way. It was too deep to ford, so Picó sent scouts up and down it to see if they could find a bridge. They returned and said that just a couple of miles away there was a magnificent bridge where they'd run into a bunch of engineers. "They said we should hurry up. They've been working on it for three days and they're going to blow it up today."

X It was, in fact, a splendid modern bridge, intact like all the others we'd seen. Twenty men commanded by a lieutenant were hard at work in water up to their waists. On the other side of the river, about a mile away, was a low hill covered by junipers and stunted pines: the only trees on the gray plain that ^{stretched all around} ~~stretched~~ before us. After talking with the lieutenant, Picó told me to take our troops and mules to that little wood while he and five veteran gunners stayed behind to help with that delicate job. The truth is they didn't need Picó, but I knew him well enough to be sure he was dying to snoop around and see how they'd blow up the bridge. He wouldn't have missed that show for anything on earth.

X The first light of dawn began to break. Seen from that hill, the plain around us seemed endless, ^{so} ~~deeply~~ calm, and utterly deserted. Picó had told me to keep an eye on the horizon to our west with my telescope, which was quite a bit more powerful than his binoculars. All I could see was that steppe, as gray and monotonous as despair, crossed by an empty highway.

Suddenly I thought I heard a buzzing in the distance. The daylight was still too dim for me to make out anything fifteen miles from my lookout, and I didn't want Picó to kid me for sounding the alarm just because I felt vaguely uneasy, but I felt more and more uneasy with every passing minute.

All of a sudden the sun rose, huge and red as a watermelon, and there, on the highway, almost at the horizon, I saw something moving.

2X But I couldn't figure out what it was. My ^{telescope} ~~spyglass~~--which I rested ⁱⁿ ~~on~~ a fork in a tree so it wouldn't move--wasn't good enough to make out more than some tiny specks that advanced very slowly, making me think of almost-imperceptible bacilli seen through a microscope. I tried to keep them in sight but they vanished for long periods as if they'd never existed. While I was busy observing them, the twenty engineers had left the bridge and, widely scattered, were calmly making their way across the fields. That friendly lieutenant came to tell me Picó and his five men had stayed beneath the bridge. "They decided they'd blow it up when the right time comes," he told me. "We left everything ready. All they have to do is connect the wire that'll activate the TNT." "Isn't that hard to do?" I asked. "It's simple," he replied, "very simple. And we've got to get going; we have other work to do."

I returned to my ^{telescope} ~~spyglass~~ and, to my surprise, I again saw those specks that had so intrigued me, but now they were motionless. So motionless that I doubted whether they had ever moved. They were too far away for me to tell if they were patches of tar on the highway or shadows; but shadows of what, in that barren monotony? While I peered at them, the five gunners arrived. Only Picó had remained beneath the bridge. He'd written on a scrap of paper: "Wait with the troops. Stay where you are. Let the men get a little sleep. Keep an eye out and tell me if you see

X anything. With ~~education~~ ^{skill} and patience, we can do this job right." They told me he was hiding among some reeds on the bank, two or three hundred yards from the bridge. "From there," they said, "he can't see anything but the top of this hill." I nervously kept my telescope focused on those unmoving blotches or shadows. It wasn't till after midday that they finally stirred. There were about a dozen of them, but a dozen what? At that distance, they seemed to move with excruciating slowness, one behind the other. For a while they disappeared in a dip in the terrain. Toward two o'clock they reappeared.

Now I could see what they were: ten or eleven troop carriers, very slow and cumbersome. They couldn't have been going much faster than a walk.

As on other occasions, I marveled at their resemblance to toys when seen from a distance: a column of ten or twelve toy trucks lumbering down the highway without the slightest precaution--whom should they have been afraid of?--and now I could make out the men like toy soldiers. Another couple of hours passed. I kept Picó informed of everything through a messenger we sent back and forth. I kept those troop carriers in sight, my eye glued to the telescope. The messenger came back with exact instructions: "Pile up some dry brush, and when the first one reaches the bridge, light a fire so I can see the smoke." They stopped again for over half an hour. Then they started up again, still at a snail's pace. They looked like a cross between trucks and tanks, very big, very heavy, and very old-fashioned. Their occupants, without a worry in the world, were now clearly visible in those steel museum pieces from which their torsos stuck out. At the age of six or seven, I'd had a troop carrier based on that model with toy soldiers also visible from the waist up, sitting on benches. There were slots in the benches that held pivots

attached to each soldier's rear . . . suddenly they disappeared behind a grayish undulation and then reemerged nearer the river. "Wait for me till nightfall," Picó had written on the last scrap of paper he'd given the messenger. "If I haven't come by then, set out with the troops."

X It seems like a dream when I remember ~~the~~^{the} dry, half-decomposed brush I'd piled up and the smoke, so thick and white at first and then so black and acrid that it made me cough. Our soldiers gradually awoke and stared at me as though I'd gone mad (they didn't know this was the signal Picó and I had agreed upon). Yes, as though I'd gone mad: who else but a lunatic would light a fire and let enemy planes know where we were? And suddenly their eyes widened as they saw that line of troop carriers crossing the bridge--the first was about to roll off while the last had just rolled onto it, exactly as if they'd made ~~that~~^{the} bridge to measure for that armored column! It was early evening, the sun was low when a cloud of black smoke silently rose from the bridge along with fragments of toy soldiers, steel, and stone all mixed together. Everything in silence, a few seconds of silence, and ~~then a~~^{then a} tremendous blast, a phenomenal boom that rocked our little hill and made the branches sway on the pines.

X It's like a dream when I remember our wild joy at the sight of those fragments flying through the air. What an explosion! Like a dream, those fragments that weren't toy soldiers but men who could have been my friends and comrades, whose friend and comrade I'd wanted to be not long before, and nonetheless I felt drunk on the savage joy of watching them fly in all directions. "Nice work!" muttered the soldiers around me, beside themselves with admiration, "nice fucking work!" And it was then, yes then, that I had a strange waking dream. Suddenly everything disappeared: the blown up bridge, the soldiers around me, frozen in admiration, muttering "Nice fucking work!", that endless steppe, the setting sun. I

could see nothing but the face of Doctor Gallifa, as though it had filled the entire horizon.

He smiled sorrowfully, in reproach, but then his face faded away in the sunset and all I could see was a dungeon--what a black dungeon!--and the sun reached the horizon and was a red watermelon again and he was down in that dungeon because the sun's red ball turned into that black dungeon and in the depths of that dungeon I again saw his face. It was covered with blood.

And in one corner of the dungeon, some men swarmed like a pack of rats around a dead animal and among them, as though trying to pass unnoticed, I saw him and recognized him. Yes, I saw Lamonedá, his face half hidden by a red and black bandanna. I saw him with rare precision--I'd never seen anything so precise in my entire life!--when Picó shook me out of my dream. "Hey, wake up! The sun's set! Let's get a move on!"

Another evening, during another glorious sunset above that endless steppe, we saw a little wooded dell in the distance, an oasis in the desert. After all those days, we were going to run across a civilian; only one, but what a civilian! A madman perhaps; certainly an apparition. A big building was hidden among those maples and laurels, those magnolias and arborvitae. The grounds and building were so unexpected that we might have thought they were a mirage. The civilian we found there later told us it was a spa famous for its mineral springs. Fascinated, we went in. It was a sort of Swiss chalet of vast proportions, and everything was neatly ~~arranged~~ ^{laid out} as though they were expecting their habitual clientele, but there was no one, of course; only him.

Alone in the dining room, a middle-aged man, very well dressed, stood behind the bar and showed not the slightest surprise, as though he'd been expecting us.

"Come in. Please be seated."

Xlc He was formal but welcoming. The tables were set with plates and
cutlery. China, silverware, and goblets: everything was of the finest
quality. It was an elegant spa, famous before the war, and we all gazed at
each other in silence, stunned by its order, cleanliness, and luxury.
X Through a big window we could look out ^{at} upon the grounds, ~~dense~~ ^{lush} and
shadowy in the setting sun's last light. We sat down, yielding to that
gentleman's entreaties, in parties of four or five around each table. He
switched on the electric lights, which in those circumstances seemed like
magic to us. He explained that they got the electricity from a waterfall on
the property and went into great detail about how the generator worked.
Shaking his head, Picó looked at the gentleman and then at me. "Home-
grown electricity!" he chuckled, but he then he caught himself and stopped
short. Thinking of the major was too depressing. Huddled in our rags in
that elegant dining room, we suddenly realized that our beards were black
and bristly, our shirts torn and stiff with dried sweat, and our hair and
armpits full of lice. We suddenly realized that we stank atrociously of
rancid sweat. But our host didn't notice a thing.

"Eat gentlemen, please. Don't stand on ceremony."

And he spoke Catalan! That Catalan-speaking civilian made everything
seem even more unreal.

"Eat," he insisted. "The settings are nationalist, but the menu is
republican."

It was the first time we'd heard anyone say "nationalist" instead of
"fascist." Naturally, there was no menu. That must have been why our host
called it "republican." At a signal from Picó, we took those loaves of stale
bread, hard as rocks, and those black, shriveled olives that looked like
goat turds out of our knapsacks. The gentleman came over, sat down at

the table Picó and I were at, and shared our provisions. He wolfed down everything we gave him, babbling incoherently despite his pompous tone. We and the soldiers had emptied all the food we had, which wasn't much, onto the tables: all the remaining loaves of stale bread and olives. And we were so surprised to be eating there, at such well laid tables, that we silently devoured every single dry crust of bread and olive, staring at each other in amazement. That fantastic supper was interrupted by a big shell exploding on the grounds. Another quickly followed it, and another and another.

"Four: it's a complete battery," said Picó. "Turn off the lights, please."

But the gentleman paid no attention. He went on talking to us in that formal tone, as though he took us for some of the usual rich guests at his spa.

"You know, I have nothing to fear"--and he smiled enigmatically. Thinking the second round would probably include a direct hit on that Swiss chalet, we hastily strapped on our knapsacks.

"Come with us," Picó told our host, but he was at the entrance to the dining room, which was still brightly lit, standing at the top of the three steps leading down from the door.

"Go ahead, gentlemen, go ahead; don't stand on ceremony" he repeated in the most cordial of tones. "Don't stand on ceremony, gentlemen."

Picó looked at me in puzzlement while a second round burst, this time on the other side of the spa. Standing in that dark, thick wood, the soldiers awaited their captain's orders. Our column set out, while the gentleman, still standing in that blazing doorway, waved goodbye. "Good night, republicans, and always remember: the settings are nationalist, but

the menu's . . ."

He wasn't able to finish his sentence. A third round scored a direct hit on his establishment, sending glass, tiles, and walls flying through the air with a terrifying din. Despite everything, the lights still burned brightly as we hastened to put some space between ourselves and that chalet. We could still hear the man's voice shouting cheerfully, "Don't worry about me. I'm on their side, not yours. They have nothing against me!"

There were four more explosions, and now everything left of his chalet collapsed in pitch darkness, followed a few seconds later by crackling flames. We quickly left all that behind us and found ourselves again surrounded by barren steppe. It was a moonless night, chilly and bracing. The spa and its owner, who had been blown to bits together, had already been forgotten. The next evening, after sleeping all day hidden in a ravine, we came across a farmhouse.

It seemed abandoned, which moreover was quite natural under the circumstances. We started ransacking it for food. In the pantry, to our joy, we found a ham, a big slab of salt pork, and four fat sausages hanging from ~~the~~ ^{the} beams on the ceiling. An enormous earthen jar stood in one corner, full of oil and hunks of pork they'd been pickling. Picó began giving orders. We had to share that booty fairly. I acted as his secretary. Just when we'd lugged that jar outside--it was so big and heavy it took four of us to lift it--and were about to divide its contents among our hundred men, we saw an apparition.

We stopped dead in our tracks and put the jar down on the ground. She was hardly more than a girl, around fourteen years old. She was tall and very thin, very pale, with jet-black eyes and hair. She was dressed in mourning. Standing motionless on the landing atop the stairs, she looked

down at us reproachfully. She held an oil lamp, whose dim light shone directly on her face.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourselves?"

Her voice seemed to come from far away. She spoke in Catalan, like the owner of that spa, but with an Aragonese accent. We were frozen to the spot, fascinated, listening to that voice.

"Cowards that you are, you can't defend us, and now you want to rob us too, right in your own country! We waited for you, thinking you were our brothers, you finally arrived, and what do you do? Where is the Virgin Mary? ^{where} where are the saints in Heaven? Whom shall we turn to? Everyone shuns you like the plague. I'm all alone here. You can take everything; it's all of you against me . . ."

That night we marched on empty stomachs.

Shortly before dawn, we reached a river bigger than any of the others we'd crossed. We didn't know it at the time, but it was the Cinca. Picó didn't want to try and find a bridge, "because," he said, "we have to avoid bridges and roads more than ever now that we're getting near the new front." While we tried to ford it in water up to our necks, we saw other groups like ourselves upstream and downstream: little lost groups that converged on those few miles of fordable river. The sight of other Catalan soldiers after so many days encouraged us. We were no longer alone! The raging current carried away a mule and a few men. There were bluffs on the other side.

It was there, once we'd forded the Cinca, that we finally found republican positions: there, on those bluffs. They'd improvised trenches and strung barbed wire to keep the enemy from crossing. It was the first line of trenches we'd seen in three weeks of rout. They told us that behind that line, our army was starting to regroup for a counterattack. The

scattered bands that straggled in, like ours, were in fact reassigned to new units being created.

X We saw a big town on a hill, about a mile and a half to our rear toward the east. It was topped by an old church with a steeple you'd have taken for the tower on a castle. All this was outlined in black against a sky that was beginning to glow like the gold background ^{on} ~~to~~ an altarpiece. On top of the steeple some storks were nesting. I could see it clearly through my telescope: a nest as big as a wagon wheel. The mother and father flew back and forth between their nest and the river, carrying fish that wriggled and flashed in the first rays of sunlight and that their nestlings hungrily devoured.

"It's spring," Picó said. "Spring is here. The storks are the first to leave and the first to return. The weather's going to be good from now on."

I thought of those storks Lluís and I had watched at the end of summer when they were getting ready to fly south. How many things had happened since then!

One afternoon, taking advantage of the fact that there was no more fighting (the enemy offensive had finally ended), I walked to that town. It was full of stray soldiers who'd been in the most diverse brigades and divisions; and civilians, mainly peasants, who'd fled the battles. A whole chaotic world had formed around that town. They slept in hastily erected shacks, in caves, or out in the open. The old, women and children, the sick and wounded. The fascist air force had bombed and strafed them as they fled in their wagons. Those poor souls were unaware of the most basic rules of camouflage. They'd traveled by day, without the slightest precaution, along the main roads, crossing treeless plains. Behind them they told us they'd left a trail of smashed wagons, disemboweled nags,

corpses and those too sick to continue.

What misery, my God! They lived on leftovers from the soldiers' mess.

Picó had never mentioned Lluís. We never uttered his name between us. Why should we have talked about him? An old lady from Castel de Olivo recognized me. She was lining up with lots of other people to beg for a bowl of soup outside an army kitchen.

"We saw Don Luis ~~the~~ the day before the trouble started," she told me. "He didn't see us; he was staring straight ahead. He was in a carriage with a woman wrapped in a blanket who looked like Our Lady of Sorrows. They tore straight through Castel and turned off toward Olivet de la Virgen."

Olivet had fallen the first day of the offensive, a few hours after it had begun. There had been almost no resistance.

PART FOUR

Quant à moi, je serais bien
content si un jour on venait à
prétendre que Henri Bergson n'a
pas existé.

Henri Bergson

I

I found out by accident, on account of my relationship with a small group of Catalan nuns who survived, half in hiding, waiting to sail for the Caribbean. ^{*} They sent our poor nuns far from home, to America, to Africa, to the Philippines. And one of them was his sister. On the 3rd, they'd brought him from the border to Barcelona ^{handed to handcuffs} in chains. Like everyone else who wasn't in on the secret, she didn't find out till the 8th. That day and the next, she made various unsuccessful attempts to get into the castle on Montjuïc. ^{P.M.} At seven ~~in the evening~~ on the 10th, she finally got to see him through the bars, three yards away. "He was very calm and spoke to me in the same clear voice as ever." Two days later, she saw him again. They'd let her into his cell. He embraced her, she wept, he tried to comfort her. His back and legs were so sore from the beatings that he could hardly stand ^{up}. "I'm fifty-eight years old," he told her. "How could I have dreamed of a more beautiful death?" On the morning of the 14th, he was tried by a military court. They wouldn't let her in; she had to wait outside the door. At eleven, the officers began to file out. The one in charge of his defense told her, "He's the calmest person in the courtroom. He puts us all to shame with his serenity." At nine in the evening, the same officer showed up at the apartment where the nuns were living. "Make arrangements for his burial." She decided ^{to return} ~~to return~~ to Montjuïc. ^{She} She didn't have a pass, but she got in anyway. He stuck his head through the bars. "Honey, where are you going? What are you up to at this time of night?" Because it was almost midnight. When she told him she wanted to hug him one last time, he replied, surprised, "But if they were going to execute me right away, they'd have moved me to death row." Then one of the guards said, "They're going to read you your sentence soon." "I see,"

he calmly replied. "I thought they'd move me to death row." They let her into the cell, where she spent three hours with her brother. Then they told her she had to leave. The next day, October 15th, was dawning above the Mediterranean. At half past six he was shot in one of the moats around the old castle. He'd taken his shoes off so his feet could touch the land for which he died. Among the yellowed papers I've kept from those now far-off days is the letter Sister Ramona wrote me. Every time I read it my eyes fill with tears: "Afterward they handed his body over to me. He was smiling. It was the morning of Saint Teresa's day, and I told myself I had to be strong like those women we read about in the Gospels. Beside his burial niche, I offered my life if need be so those far from our country or wasting away in prisons might return home. I prayed to Saint Teresa for our nation, to shield it from those foreigners who want to destroy it and destroy all of us. Then I said aloud to those present, 'Gentlemen, may God forgive you, for you know not what you do.' I said it without clenching my fists or holding out my hand; I said it crossing my arms over my breast, on Saint Teresa's ^{day, on Montjuic, gazing} ~~day, on Montjuic, gazing~~ out at the sea."

#

It's natural that we should see it through the mists of the past, that war as remote as our youth--and nonetheless, like our youth, as though it were yesterday. Or maybe I'm like a grandfather clock that's stopped. Perhaps any clock that's marked a moment of glory, of uncertain glory, stops there forever. I'm ashamed to admit I've never recovered from my youth or from my war. Like an infection, they're in my blood and always will be! I miss them both, with a longing as sinful as it is invincible . . . that scent of youth and war, of burning woods and rain-soaked grass, that wandering life, those nights beneath the stars, when we fell asleep

enfolded in a strange peace, for when everything's uncertain, one doesn't worry. The heart's uncertain glory, and war's, when we're twenty and war and our hearts are new and full of hope. War is stupid; perhaps that's why its roots in men's hearts ~~are~~ ^{are stuck} so deep. Kids play soldiers even if no one's taught them. War is stupid, an unquenchable thirst for glory, but can love be quenched? Can we achieve love and glory in this world? And all youth is nothing more than the uncertain glory of an April morning, a dark tempest traversed by flashes of glory, but what glory? What glory, O God? One must awaken, and awakenings are sad after nights of fever and delirium. Perhaps the worst thing about war is that it's followed by peace . . . One awakens from one's youth as from a delirious fever, but one clings to the memory of that fever and that delirium, that dark tempest, as though nothing else on earth were worth the trouble. I'm nothing more than a survivor, a ghost. I live only in my memories.

After that delirium, I entered a tunnel. I groped along in the dark, hearing muffled cries as I advanced. How long that tunnel was, how dense the darkness, how muffled the cries. All that lasted for years and years.

We drifted like the remains of a shipwreck. One found oneself cut off from all one's friends and acquaintances. If by chance one recognized a face amid the scattered flotsam, a familiar face amid so many corpse-like faces floating along the streets, one felt uncomfortable. One never knew what that person might have done during the fever and delirium, what he might do now. One tried to slip away, vanishing into the gray, famished crowds. We distrusted one another. Everyone, moreover, was crushed by his selfish worries. The port was empty, most of the railroad lines had been destroyed, there were neither trucks nor gasoline. Everyone was starving. Who bothered to listen to the bombastic speeches the radio ceaselessly vomited? One's only thought was to survive another day, to make it

X through to tomorrow. They'd had to put old streetcars back into service.

X More than once I saw one of those crocks ~~from the past~~ fall apart
beneath the weight of its passengers, who then fell upon the next one,
battling those already riding it. Cost what it might, one had to get to
work, to toil sixteen hours a day in order to buy a few rotten potatoes!

X Some people escaped across the Pyrenees. Over there, another war
had begun and I too, sinner that I am, felt tempted at times by that other
war, that other hope. But I'd lost heart. I asked myself: can ^{one} ~~we~~ ever have
X more than one war? Love more than one woman? Burn again, as ^{one} ~~we~~ once
burned so utterly? Can there be another love, another war, besides the
one love, the one war? What difference does it make if we win or lose? I
lost in both cases; I'm nothing but a ghost. I can live only in my
X memories. And when I dreamt of war--and how often I dreamed of it
X during those ten years!--it was always the same, our war, the one we'd
fought, just as I always dreamt of the same woman and still dream of her.

The gasogene . . . I can see it now, that clumsy cast-iron contraption
mounted like a hump on the backs of the rare automobiles one saw. It
burned coal dust or hazelnut shells. There was no gasoline. A few bizarre
hunchbacked automobiles and a few bizarre streetcars from another
century: that's what one saw on the streets of Barcelona. It was the war,
always the war, which had now engulfed the entire continent. One wished
the war had never happened, that one could open one's eyes one morning
and find one's country being reborn, its hopes still intact.

But in reality . . . it was like meeting a girl one had known when
she was young and idealistic, now changed into God knows what, her face
old and caked with makeup, lit by a streetlamp's harsh glare on some
notorious corner. I wish that orgy of hatred, those first few years after
the war, had been a bad dream, and they've stuck in my memory as

X though they were a bad dream. The gas chambers were already smoking in Germany; and heavy trucks set out from vacant lots on the other side of the Llobregat and crossed Barcelona on their way to the ~~huge~~^{vast} potter's field. How slowly they advanced with their heavy loads, at night, covered with lumpy tarpaulins as though they covered sacks of potatoes. Some people followed them, hoping a bump in the road would knock off one of the sacks. One time when I was standing by the highway, near a bridge across the river, one of them did fall off, but it wasn't a sack of potatoes. It was an old man. They didn't bother to pick him up. They knocked him off the road with their rifle-butts so he wouldn't block traffic.

X ~~who~~^{that} The gas chambers were already smoking in Germany. Himmler was no dream. He came to Spain. Among the names of the welcoming committee ~~who~~^{that} appeared on the newspapers' front pages, I saw one I knew only too well: Lamonedà. At that moment, he was a public figure.

#

X I'd only spent nine months in a concentration camp. They'd let me out so I could return to Barcelona and finish my studies; because in spite of everything, I wanted to finish my studies. I wanted to be a priest.

X I was in a daze. My Aunt Lluàcia chattered away ~~and~~^{but} I couldn't follow what she was saying. "Why are you staring at me like that with your mouth open?" she asked, annoyed, but I couldn't help it. My spirit was drifting far away. I felt cut off from everything that had been my life before. I'd fallen into a kind of stupor in which I stared off into space for hours on end, my mouth hanging open. Three years later, I still hadn't managed to find out anything definite about Doctor Gallifa, nor did I know what had become of Lluís, Soleràs, or any of my other friends. I'd ~~gone in~~^{visited} all the buildings on Arc del Teatre Street, searching for the anarchist's

X widow. Finally some people told me she'd disappeared a few months before and they didn't know where she was. I'd written to his brother, who now lived on his estate. He replied that they hadn't heard ~~a thing~~ ^{anything} about him since the end of 1936. Everything was like that during those years: lost trails, vanished lives, people who might have been dead or alive. At least I found out one thing: Doctor Gallifa had indeed lived in hiding in that attic. Without Doctor Gallifa, Lluís, and Soleràs, I felt cut off from everything and everyone. I floated like driftwood, I was nothing but a ghost. I ended up being so profoundly cut off from everything happening--and plenty of things were happening--that sometimes for hours on end I'd think of nothing but my telescope, that telescope from my childhood that had been with me throughout the war and that I'd lost at the very end, in our final rout. It never occurred to me that I could buy another. Another wouldn't have been the same, the one from my childhood, the one through which Lluís and I had gazed at the stars in those days--the war--which now seemed as blessed and distant as Paradise lost.

As far as Soleràs was concerned, the only thing I managed to find out, three long years after the war, was that his octogenarian aunt lived in Grenoble. Apparently the family was originally from Grenoble, something he'd never told us, and they had some distant cousins there. The aunt, I learned, had gone to live there at the beginning of the war, a detail Soleràs had also concealed from us. I gathered that once her nephew had disappeared, she'd decided never to return to Barcelona, where everything would have reminded her of him. But these are just hunches on my part. She didn't answer the letters I wrote asking for information about him, unless one considers an answer the colored engraving, a devotional engraving of the commonest sort, that I received from Grenoble in an envelope with no return address or anything else in her handwriting

except my address (which was once again Aunt Llúcia's house in Sarrià). It depicted Saint Philomena.

It wasn't till the end of one rainy December that I found out anything more definite about Soleràs and Doctor Gallifa. It came to me in the most unexpected fashion, through another ghost as cut off from everything as I was.

#

X I'd finished my studies shortly before but hadn't been assigned to any parish. While I waited, I lived at my aunt's house and took long strolls through Barcelona, where I had almost nothing to do. One morning I went into a bar on the Ronda de Sant Pau. I hadn't eaten breakfast and I ordered a croissant and a cup of barley tea. Coffee and milk were still hard to get and expensive. There was no bread either, but you could buy as many croissants as you liked if you could afford them. In order to dunk my croissant in peace, I'd chosen a table ~~in the penumbra~~ at the back of the establishment. This was on account of my cassock. At that time a priest in a café was still frowned upon, and I couldn't very well explain to one and all that I'd just quarreled with my aunt and while I was looking for a boarding house and still sleeping in ~~my bedroom~~ in Sarrià I led a wandering life and kept body and soul together with croissants dunked in barley tea.

X So I was at the back of the establishment, and at the front I saw the fishbowl--I mean the terrace, which they'd glassed in for the winter.

#

And there was another ghost, sitting at a little marble table dunking a croissant in a cup of barley tea, just like me.

He stared through the glass at that avenue, which despite everything was still bustling and colorful. Those bizarre streetcars rumbled by, like

mighty antediluvian dinosaurs, rattling their loose ironwork and almost disappearing beneath loads of passengers hanging on for dear life. Occasionally a long black car, with a hump awkwardly fastened to its back, would also pass, while endless crowds trudged along the sidewalks. Moreover, it was a cold, gray morning. Those overloaded streetcars reminded me of dead animals attacked by swarms of ^Iants, and the neon signs, which had been turned off when the sun rose, had the unhealthy air of someone awakening after a night of ^{debauchery}~~merrymaking~~: "Rexy Mura, No More Baldness!", "Rexy Mura, Away with Unneeded Fuzz!", "Barcelona by Night" and lots of others, all stupid and depressing with their laconic slogans.

Yet despite everything those sidewalks were full of people and those people, though ragged and hungry, were life! The other ghost stared out at that human river. He looked over fifty. I could only see him from an angle, against the light and at a distance, so I couldn't get a good look at him. He vaguely reminded me of a shipwrecked sailor who, from the reef on which he's run aground, stares out in despair at the ocean's immensity. Only the glass separated him from life, but he sat there as though the glass had cut him off from it forever. He also gave the impression of wearing shoes with soles so thin that the cruel dampness of that late-December morning ^{seeped}~~seemed to seep~~ through him like an insidious electric current.

He dropped bits of croissant into his cup like someone throwing bread crumbs to fish--that is, without conviction, knowing full well that fish are ungrateful. At that moment a steamship blew its horn, something rare during those years when the ^{harbor}~~port~~ was usually empty. It distracted my attention from the ghost. At ^{the}~~that~~ time (it was before they sent me to the Caribbean), except for the few weeks I'd spent in a French refugee camp I'd never left Spain, and the horn seemed to beckon me to glamorous, far-

off tropical lands, islands of eternal spring on the other side of the ocean that I'd only known in dreams but that one day, alas, I'd know for real. When the horn's tones had vanished in the cold air, I looked at him again. Imagine my surprise: the ghost, holding his cup and croissant, was coming toward me.

It was Lamonedà.

#

There was something in his gaze that made me think of a dead man gazing at me from the shores of the great beyond. His wizened features, shadowed by a four-day beard, gave off a sense of disillusionment. You'd have thought he was a ~~homeless~~ dog who expected nothing but ~~rocks~~ ^{stones} and beatings from life.

He sat down beside me, muttering, "I assume you don't mind . . ." and without waiting for an answer--an answer that never came because I was dumbfounded--he added, "The last time we saw each other was in July 1936. And now . . . I've just turned fifty, with nothing to show for it."

These were his opening words. And he repeated, "with nothing to show for it." I felt even more strongly that we were a pair of ghosts and recalled Soleràs (at the time I still thought Soleràs was alive, even if we didn't know where). It reminded me of one time when we were arguing about ghosts and Picó had told us that scientific-minded types like him didn't believe in them. Soleràs had interrupted, "You mean to say there's anything else?" So now Lamonedà's ghost was sitting beside me, picking his nose and glancing toward the terrace. The human stream flowed ceaselessly by while I did some mental arithmetic: if he'd just turned fifty with nothing to show for it, he must have been forty-three on the eve of the war, when he was still studying to be a pharmacist--his eternal studies that had only helped him get arrested on suspicion of selling cocaine! He'd

started reciting a long monologue, and I listened to him without listening.

I thought someone had played a trick on me by placing him there beside me, seated at the same marble table, dunking a croissant identical to mine in a twin cup of barley tea, and again I thought of Soleràs and how he'd once told me about the pictures with which his aunt had covered every square inch of wall in their apartment. It seems she was appalled by light and open spaces and that blank walls made her uncomfortable. And one of

X the pictures was an engraving of all the kings on earth--before the F first

X W W World War, of course--depicted as though they were all sitting together

("and there were fifty or sixty of them," Soleràs had said) like one big

happy family around their patriarch, Emperor Franz Josef, but the most

X interesting touch, he'd said, was that his aunt had carefully covered over

the teenaged Alfonso XIII with a bearded personage who was none other

than Don Carlos de Borbón y Austria-Este in person, the Carlists' beloved

Carlos VII. And all this came back to me then because I felt someone had

played a trick on me, turning Soleràs into this ghost who went on reciting

his monologue. He recited his monologue but I couldn't grasp what he was

saying; he said so many things! I couldn't figure out what he was talking

about: bitter disillusionments, ingratitude, disappointments. And time went

by and there wasn't a trace of croissant or barley tea left and he kept on

talking and talking. I gathered that my cassock made him take for granted

that I'd been on his side, a frequent error at that time. I was about to set

him straight when I realized that if I kept my mouth shut he'd tell me all

X kinds of things I wanted to know.

The first and main thing I wanted to find out R know was whether he knew what had become of his uncle.

"What do you want to know about him?" he interrupted, as though the subject made him uneasy. "You probably already know everything there

is to know. They've given him up for dead, and some fools even talk about miracles. I'll tell you later. First let me tell you about my tenant farmer. He's responsible for the state I'm in . . . dire poverty."

Dire poverty . . . But hadn't he been a big shot? Or had I imagined those front pages ~~in the newspapers?~~ The ghost glanced at me suspiciously.

"You didn't imagine them . . . As I'm sitting here ~~before~~ ^{beside} you, I was one of the top authorities. As for now . . ."

And he pointed to the tattered clothes that made him look like a shipwrecked sailor.

"But you have your farm," I said. "That big farm near Vic, if I remember right."

"Not all that big," he bitterly replied. "Not all that big. My father had mortgaged some parts and sold others behind my back. According to his will, he'd ~~had to do it~~ ^{done it} to pay for my studies. That was a lie. What he'd wanted was to reduce my inheritance so the other's would be bigger.

I'd better explain what I mean. It's a bit complicated but spicy. It turns out my beloved father had had a little fun, you know, without telling his family, very discreetly. It wasn't till after he died that we found out he

had another son, a bastard who turned up in his will. So I have a brother, ^{just} as sure as I'm sitting here ~~beside~~ ^{beside} you. A brother! Isn't an illegitimate son what's commonly known as a . . .? My father made me his heir on the

condition that I fork over five ^h-hundred pessetes a month throughout my life to my . . . brother. And that's not all. If I die childless, the farm will go to him."

"But aside from this unexpected brother, you were his only child . . ."

"An orphan!" the fifty-year-old orphan exclaimed with a sneer. "They pay me ten thousand pessetes a year to rent that farm. I'll tell you about

X it in a minute. I have to give five hundred a month to my brother. You can figure it out for yourself: I'm always broke! That someone should be screwed because his father, ~~centuries~~ ^{decades} ago, had a little fun . . . If I told you what I've been through . . . First of all, I never knew my mother, as you know."

I thought that I hadn't known my mother either, or barely, and the same was true of Lluís and Soleràs, but at least Lamonedà had known his father, who'd lived to a ripe old age.

2X "My father? ~~It~~ ^{The less said the better.} hmmm, my father . . . ~~It's better not to talk about him.~~ You know my mother was the sister of this Doctor Gallifa you're so worried about and that she died in an accident shortly after bringing me into the world. Well, once you know that you know as much as I do. My father never said a word about her. My father . . . hmmm . . . never mentioned her name."

X Without any transition, because he was constantly jumping from one subject to another, he started talking about those who'd envied him and plotted and schemed to get rid of him when he'd been one of the bosses in some office or other.

"You try to do the right thing and they'll eat you alive! It's scandalous, it cries out to Heaven! I, who'd sacrificed myself, who'd braved so many dangers, who'd carried out important secret missions; I who, as I'm sitting here beside you, welcomed Himmler"--that detail came back to him as one of his most glorious moments--"who was one of the biggest shots around . . . but they slandered me, you know. They dragged my good name through the mud. They did everything possible to trip me up! The spirit we had at the beginning quickly evaporated. The real heroes have been shoved aside. The envious are out to ruin us. Newcomers attack us from all sides. To hear them talk, they were all fifth columnists! All of

them! If you add together those who were republicans before and those who are on our side now, you'll get twice the population. Sometimes I even suspect . . . Yes, at times I have this terrible suspicion. I'll tell you in the strictest confidence: I suspect the new police chief is a liberal."

He pulled a thick wallet out of the inside pocket in his jacket, a wallet that, as far as I could see, contained nothing but newspaper clippings.

"I've kept them, you know. I keep everything! Look what he had them publish just after they fired me. Tell me if this man isn't a Freemason!"

I still have the clipping, because he gave it to me. He had several copies in his wallet, and apparently he handed them out to ~~everyone~~ ^{those} he knew to persuade them that the new police chief was an extremely dangerous Red. The statement read: "From today on, we shall only accept signed accusations submitted in writing, ^{while} guaranteeing the accusers' absolute anonymity and promising to return their accusations once the facts therein have been verified, ^{as} anonymous accusations by telephone and letter have caused and continue to cause constant anxiety in homes whose tranquility is disturbed day after day by ~~continuous~~ ^{the public} false information. We trust that ~~everyone~~ will understand our purpose in imposing this regulation and that from now on, when accusations are made in the name of our holy cause, they will not sully it with unfounded slander . . ."

"It was because of my accusations over the phone that he threw me out in the street. I'm too good, too straightforward, too idealistic: that was my downfall. None of the others had credentials like mine, and their revenge was to make my life a living hell. So here I am, broke. I'm broke, and on the other hand that druggist . . . You remember that druggist on Sant Pau Street back in 1930 who called the cops because he claimed I

was raiding his stock of cocaine? Well, in spite of that, in spite of the fact that he'd called the cops on me in 1930, he's selling his concoctions again, as happy as can be. The first thing the new police chief did was set him free . . ."

X He was overwhelmed by indignation at such scandalous outrages when suddenly something distracted him from his sorrows. One of those women who frequent the ~~Rondes of Sant Antoni~~ *Ronda de* and Sant Pau had come in: one of those women who catch your eye with their flaming red hair and spike heels. This apparition gracefully slipped onto one of the stools at the bar and ordered breakfast, while also glancing at us and smiling.

"This broad has something that makes you sit up and take notice," Lamonedà muttered. "I know her. Her name is Malvina. She doesn't remember me, but I remember perfectly that her full name is Malvina Canals i Gonzàlez. Boy, do I ever remember her . . . I remember everything and everyone! I've got a good memory; too good, in fact. That was one of the things that ruined me, because in these times amnesiacs go farther. Yes, that broad's name is Malvina, but we weren't talking about her. We were talking about my tenant farmer"--and he explained that before the war his father had rented his farm to a tenant with "bad ideas," so bad that in 1934 he'd voted for the republicans. X "My father got rid of him, so we didn't have a tenant. When the war came, they collectivized the farms. My father had to go into hiding in Barcelona. As for me, I'm sure you know I fled in September 1936. I got letters from him through the International Red Cross. In one of the last ones, he told me he was starving to death and couldn't afford to buy bread on the black market. In one of these difficult moments, the new tenant farmer made his appearance. X *They'd* He'd met him because they were both fifth columnists. He was from our village and was also in hiding in Barcelona, but he had money

X
precisely because he was involved in the black market. Not only did he lease the farm from ~~him~~ ^{my father} even though it was collectivized and he wouldn't be able to work it till God knows when, but he paid him a bonus of a hundred thousand pessetes, apart from the ten thousand a year that they'd agreed upon. He paid him the bonus in cash, in front of a notary who'd drawn up the lease. My father wrote to me praising this man's generosity to the skies. I quickly replied saying he shouldn't trust him and should make sure the bills were from before the war . . . Gee, that Malvina sure looks good!"

He'd interrupted his monologue to gape at her.

"So were they from before the war?"

"What you do think? I found them when I came back. My father had died a few weeks before I got here. A hundred brand-new thousand-pesseta bills, hot off the Reds' presses! When I took them to the Bank of Spain, they told me that if I felt like wallpapering my apartment with them, they'd give me as many sacks as I wanted. I tried to get the lease cancelled; the supreme court said it was valid. There was only one way out: to have that tenant shot as a Red. But he was just the opposite! I've really had a run of rotten luck!"

At that very moment, Malvina swiveled around on her stool, leaned back against the counter, crossed her legs and fixed Lamonedá with a brazen stare.

"What a bombshell! I can see you're washed-up. I can see a gorgeous dish like her doesn't do anything for you. As for me . . . I'm no Jesuit! I have no use for cassocks. I go for broads, not cassocks!" and he laughed idiotically as though he'd just said something witty. "Me, I'm a real red-blooded he-man! That was my downfall . . . This new chief of police, this disgraceful liberal, this Freemason in disguise, this Red, even claimed that

2X I had certain young ladies like Malvina arrested as Reds when the only thing red about them was their dyed hair . . . Someday I'll have to show you my novels. Stendhal pales by comparison! So what? When you're a real man, it's ^{only} ~~not~~ natural . . . ~~if you know~~ I've always had a weakness for redheads . . . What? Do I still write novels? More than ever! Since I have nothing else to do! They're better than Stendhal's, with more style. My style's more elegant than Eugeni d'Ors's. One day I'll show them to you. X Would you believe they're as unpublished now as during the masonic republic? Editors still turn them down. I wrote anonymous letters accusing all of them, but now, with this new police chief . . . Christ, what thighs! She knows they're sensational and is making sure we know it too . . . Nothing like Saint Pandulfa's, wow!" and again he laughed that idiotic laugh of his.

I kept silent, but my look must have seemed disapproving because he continued in a more defensive tone, "Listen, I'm no Jesuit. I despise hypocrisy. Why should I deceive you? You want me to pretend I prefer Saint Pandulfa to a dish like Malvina?"

X I'd never heard of this Saint Pandulfa. From what he went on to say, I gathered that she was worshipped in a very small area consisting of his village. He started in on a long, involved story about someone in his family in the eighteenth century, a younger brother of his great-great-grandfather, "not on Gallifa's side ~~of the family~~ but on the Lamonedá side, which was completely different," a rich canon who'd made a pilgrimage to Rome and brought back a relic: Saint Pandulfa's mummy. "And that's why," he explained, "all the women in my family since have been named Pandulfa, though actually it's been a long time since there was a woman in my family."

"The mummy's rather repulsive, of course," he added, "but she works

miracles. The canon had a crypt dug at his expense beneath the main altar. He placed a big glass case in the middle of the crypt, on top of a black marble base. To save money, he had them make the base hollow, and they laid out the mummy as though she were sleeping in that case, where you can see her. The crypt is always locked, so you have to ask the sexton for the key. In fact, you have to turn the key three times to open it, because that holy stiff is inside. She's still there. Aren't you curious to know how come my village church and the crypt and Saint Pandulfa's corpse weren't burnt by the Reds? Well, it was the other tenant farmer, that clodhopper my father threw out because of his bad ideas. He had the bright idea of saving everything. He was the mayor, and he guarded that village like a watchdog against the patrols that were driving all over the country in requisitioned trucks. He even formed a special militia, and they opened fire on ~~the~~^{the} anarchists. And so he saved the priest's life and the church. All this will show you what a dangerous Red he was. How could he have kept the anarchists from killing and burning if he hadn't been a very influential Red, a Red of the worst sort? He even had the gall to stay in that village when the others were running like scared rabbits. That's how we managed to catch up with him."

With a weary sigh, Malvina had finally gotten up and walked out, rolling from side to side like a caravel. Lamonedá followed her with his eyes.

"There are some sensational broads," he muttered, "but all they care about is your wallet. I know from experience that this Malvina, if you offer her less than twenty duros, will laugh in your face and say, 'Who the hell do you think I am?'" And without any transition, "Do you remember the last time we met? It was in that church they were going to burn. And you tried to stop them! What a number! I just missed out on

another terrific lay for want of a twenty-duro bill! I always have bad luck!"

Malvina--if that was actually her name--had begun walking briskly back and forth on the sidewalk outside, so that she appeared and reappeared through the glass, glancing and smiling at the more prosperous-looking passersby. Lamonedá's eyes followed her comings and goings--she was wearing very high heels and strode purposefully--while he continued his monologue. Beyond the glass, the human river flowed endlessly by, and the whole thing reminded me of an underwater scene. Amid all those gray, anonymous congers, that redhead with spike heels seemed like a bright tropical fish. Time flowed by too, and the ghost's voice grew more and more monotonous. I couldn't figure out what he was talking about. "How could we have defended the Church if nobody had attacked it?" he asked, and perhaps he was referring to that tenant farmer, the previous one, but I couldn't follow him. "Of course he was a Red. Otherwise, why would he have cared if we gunned down the priest and burnt the church? They caught him and he got what he deserved. Imagine: at his trial he spoke only Catalan! It's true he couldn't speak anything else, he'd hardly left his village, but it wasn't him, it was the other, the new one I'd have liked to shoot. What rotten luck!" and then he started in on a bunch of people who'd refused to help him, and I couldn't make head or tail of his ravings which were like the noise of rushing water and now he was ~~blathering on~~ ^{falling} about some anarchist, a character he considered very important. "What do you mean you've never heard of him? He's as famous as they come!" And suddenly a light bulb went on in my head.

"Did you say Milmany?"

"That's right, the famous Llibert Milmany, the potentate, ~~the manager~~ ^{head of advertising at}

~~of~~ ^g Remy Mura."--and Lamonedá winked at me--"Have you delved into the

secrets of Remy Mura? The same concoction that makes men's hair grow keeps it from growing on women! With a secret formula like that, you can go far! Do you know he's the son of a dangerous anarchist? How did I find out? Imagine! I've known him for years . . . How did I meet him? Don't make me laugh, Cruells! If you could see the look on your face! Anyhow, it's strange you haven't heard about old Milmany's execution. Of course the newspapers don't print these kinds of things, but word gets around all the same. They garroted him not long ago. You must know he published a weekly throughout the war in which he accused the incendiaries and murderers of being agents provocateurs. An old fool, as you can see; so different from his son Llibert . . . so different! The son's as sharp as they come. He knows that with the same concoction you can get diametrically opposed results. He knows how to kill two birds with one stone, our brilliant comrade! But his father . . . whew, as different as could be! Imagine: at the end the war, he refused to leave Barcelona. 'I'd rather die in Catalonia than live abroad,' and no one could budge him. You remember how my uncle Gallifa also refused to go into exile? Llibert was extremely anxious to send him as far away as possible so he'd be forgotten, because a father that compromising can really be a nuisance. Let's say he was as eager as I was to see my uncle in France. Well, the old man was respected by a lot of Catalan workers. They offered him an important post in the new unions. All he had to do was change colors like everyone else and he could have been a big wheel, a kind of minister. He refused. They had to imply that it was a choice between that post and his . . ."

Lamoneda heaved a deep sigh. "His son makes millions nowadays. The last time I tried to see him, a liveried servant slammed the door in my face. I've even known this servant for a long time. I know every last one

of them! He's a regular gorilla. That's why Llibert hired him as his bodyguard. His name is Gutiérrez and he's from Medellín. During the war he ran a collectivized factory that manufactured soup noodles--and now he works as a bodyguard for our brilliant comrade Llibert Milmany, who's a millionaire while I'm broke. What a crazy mixed-up world! That jerk Soleràs saw it coming . . ."

He'd said "that jerk Soleràs;" I could hardly believe my ears. I had no idea Lamonedá had known him. How could I take this ghost seriously, jabbering away--and my God, in such a monotone!--about such bizarre occurrences, such insane theories, such incredible dark hints? But he'd said "that jerk Soleràs," and I started from the drowsiness that had stolen over me.

"Soleràs? You knew him too?"

"Sure I knew him . . ." and he looked at me mistrustfully. "I know everyone, even if no one knows me or is willing to admit it. Did I know Soleràs? I'd known him ever since 1930! He used to drop in at the drugstore on Sant Pau Street from time to time. Yes, he was interested in cocaine for a while. He wanted to try it. He quickly got bored. He got bored with everything, never had the stamina to follow through. He didn't have any staying power! He wasn't like me. When I start something I finish it. He was no Nietzschean superman, Soleràs. In fact, he was quite the opposite. Did I know Soleràs? I'll say I did! Imagine: at the end of the war we were in the same battalion. Did I ever know him! And why are you so interested in that damned Soleràs? Did you know him too? What do you want to know about him? He disappeared right at the end of the war, and no one's heard from him since. You see, he'd tried cocaine but he got bored with it. He had no staying power."

"You say he disappeared . . ."

"That's right, and no one's heard from him since."--and the ghost glanced at me out of the corner of his eye. "You sure are the inquisitive type. I'm amazed that you knew him too. I don't remember you ever talking about him."

"That last time we met I didn't know him. I met him during the war."

X "Well, since you knew him, you'll realize he never did anything like everyone else. He used to say, 'People ^{always} do the opposite of what everyone does.' He was always talking nonsense like that. He was nothing but a jerk. Why are you so interested in his disappearance? So many people disappear in a war . . . Wasn't it my uncle's disappearance that interested you? My uncle! A kind of old Milmany! Another character! I'd warned him over and over again that they were going to ~~beat hell out of~~ ^{kill} the priests and especially Jesuits. He wouldn't believe me. 'Who could wish ~~us~~ ^{me} ill?' was his answer. I could have put him on a ship to Italy with a republican passport thanks to my connections with the great Llibert; all in vain. He said Mass in secret, he heard confession, everything. He even gave the Viaticum to people on their death beds, can you believe it, including Reds! The last time I saw him in that attic was in September, shortly before I fled Barcelona. It was still hot as hell. His face was dripping sweat. I tried one more time to persuade him. He just looked at me sarcastically. 'Leave? Run away like a coward? You should know, my son, that the worst thing a priest can do is act like a nun . . .' All those Gallifas ^a are tough as nails, each in his own way. My maternal great-grandfather, my uncle's grandfather, was a Carlist and in 1837 he held out for six months in the woods up in the Guillerries with a handful of men against a whole brigade of government troops."

"Doctor Gallifa was no Carlist!"

"Who said he was? I wasn't talking about him but about his

grandfather, Major Gallifa from the Seven Years' War. Each Gallifa's nutty in his own way, but deep down they're all the same: stubborn as mules! Tell me: is that anyplace for a Jesuit to live, that alley, Arc del Teatre Street, where in every filthy doorway there's a whore selling her body to passersby, who are mostly drunk? He cooked his own lunch, the days he ate lunch, because where could he get food? I learned all these details from an old lady who lived in the same building, a very devout old lady always clinging to priests' and monks' skirts. At one glance she'd figured out he was a Jesuit, 'Disguised as a worker, but with that face . . .' This type of old biddies have very keen noses when it comes to sniffing out reverend fathers from the Society of Jesus, no matter where they are and however they're dressed. And besides, as you'll remember, my uncle had one of those faces you see in paintings: I mean those blackened paintings in antique shops and old churches where you see priests from way back ~~when~~ ^{when 5} all bug-eyed like they were gazing at the moon. He would have starved to death if that old biddy hadn't brought him a package of rationed beans every now and again. Just beans, you know, because she'd caught on."

"Caught on to what?"

"I don't know if you remember, but my uncle took snuff. At first she gave him everything she could find: mainly rice, and bread from time to time. In short, she shared her rations with him. Since she had the key to the attic, one morning when she thought he was out she went up to clean it. She caught him red-handed, sitting there absent-mindedly taking snuff! He'd traded his bread and rice for it. He sheepishly mumbled, 'I can get along without bread, but without this . . .' Then I had to sneak out of Barcelona and didn't hear anything more about him till the end of the war. In 1939, shortly after our victory, I went back to that building on Arc del

Teatre Street. The old lady still lived there. She told me my uncle had disappeared toward the end of November 1936. She talked about him as if he were a saint. She said she prayed to him, novenas and other baloney. She told me some weird stories, miracles, all sorts of drivel. Listen, I'm no choirboy. I've been shaving for years and don't need to hear that kind of crap. That'd really be something if even my relatives . . . how can they try and make me believe someone I knew . . . tell me someone I knew is a saint and works miracles? A saint? He let himself be caught like a rat in a trap: that's it in a nutshell! After all, he was asking for it. Who forced him to stay in Barcelona? As for me, if other people want to act like fools, what can I do about it? It's not my fault!"

The ghost interrupted himself to ask in a whisper, "Could you buy me another croissant?"

It was in this fashion that I first heard about the supernatural acts attributed to Doctor Gallifa, though it wasn't till years ~~after this~~ ^{later} ~~conversation with Lamonedá~~ that the inexplicable cure took place, so upsetting that incredulous doctor that he turned into the most fervent advocate of beatification. I kept silent while Lamonedá dunked his second croissant in his second cup of barley tea.

"Now, if you want, I'll tell you about Soleràs."

He carefully wiped his lips with a paper napkin after finishing his second croissant and glanced at me suspiciously again.

"Actually, how is it that you know him too?"

"I knew his aunt," I lied, "and I met him during the war, like I told you, but I didn't have much to do with him."

"Hmmm, another old biddy very devoted to Saint Philomena. What you may not know is that he was a Red before joining our side. What a fool! He'd deserted from a Red brigade, taking all sorts of confidential plans

and information with him . . ."

"What you're saying . . ."

"Is based on first-hand experience. That was why in spite of his bizarreness they handled him with kid gloves. He was lucky, that jerk! This aunt you mentioned not only was very devoted to Saint Philomena but was a millionaire, and he was her only nephew! Even though I suspect his influence didn't come from his old aunt but from another . . . another woman much younger and less pious . . ."

"Another woman?"

"Yes, a real character!"--Lamoneda winked at me again.--"It's a complicated story and I haven't figured it all out. It seems this lady gave our side most of its reports about a certain stretch of the Aragonese front, just as our information about another part not far away came from Soleràs. I could never get it straight. I was in the secret service but not in army intelligence, which reported to the top brass and where we weren't welcome. It's complicated, I can assure you, and besides, I don't like to talk about it."

He glanced at me suspiciously again, but my face must have reassured him since he continued, "The only thing I know is that with scraps of information gathered here and there, often by chance, the army was able to slowly piece together large sections of the enemy lines, as in a puzzle. Apart from that, she must have been one hell of a broad to have so much influence. It was she who got Soleràs sprung from where they were holding him as a prisoner of war. You must know that's where they stuck all the republican deserters, and it wasn't easy to get out. Naturally, they didn't trust them. They might have been spies, saboteurs, or God knows what else. They'd reach our front lines shouting, 'We're on your side! ¡Arriba España! Franco, Franco, Franco!' but they could have been putting

X on an act. We sent spies over to their front lines claiming they wanted to join them. In fact, guys were deserting all the time from one side to the other and it was easy to slip an agent in every now and again. For example, almost every single Catalan the war caught doing his military service on our side managed slip ^{across} back and join the Reds. My being Catalan was one of the reasons they never fully trusted me. They couldn't believe a Catalan could be on their side! Since almost all the Catalans ended up deserting . . . But let's go back to what I was saying about Soleràs. Thanks to the influence of a great lady whose name I never could find out, he managed to get out of that camp in a few weeks, and moreover, as a lieutenant! What luck that idiot had! I was nothing more than second lieutenant. I could never get promoted. I've never gotten along with military types. In fact, instead of promoting me, several times they almost demoted me. But Soleràs had all the luck! Not only did they make him a lieutenant but they sent him to a front where there was no action. Can you imagine what luck? They sent him there, I gathered, because it was facing the Red brigade where he'd served. Are you starting to get the picture?"

2X Yes, I was starting to get it. I'd started to get it that day long ago when Lluís, Trini, and their son, who was close to death, set out from Santa Espina at a furious gallop in ~~our~~ ^{the} cabriolet. Lamonedada had ~~ripped~~ ^{tom} the last shreds of veil from that enigma, but in fact he'd told me nothing I hadn't suspected at the time.

"His job was to run into his ex-pals in villages in a deserted valley between the two front lines, and using exchanges as his excuse, keep up as steady a relationship as he could. I don't know if you realize bartering was common on all the snowed-in fronts. We were short of clothes, especially socks. They'd trade Catalan socks and shirts for tobacco, coffee,

and sugar: stuff we had plenty of because it came from Andalusia, the Canary Islands, and Guinea. Soleràs was such a virtuoso that he even managed to organize soccer games in one of those villages. Thanks to all sorts of tricks, our generals ended up knowing exactly what the situation was behind enemy lines ^{we} and could always choose ^{the} ~~their~~ weak points, the least fortified and worst armed, with the fewest troops, or the ones where they'd been lulled into a false sense of security and least expected us to attack. Our offensive was a stunning success; we took them completely by surprise. They promoted those who'd contributed most to it, so Soleràs became a captain. During the last few months of the war, he was still a captain but his duties were those of a major. I was already in the battalion when he took charge of it. That's how we met up again after so many years; we hadn't run into each other since 1930, the last few times he'd come by the drugstore on Sant Pau Street. What luck that dope had! If the war had lasted a little longer and he hadn't been such a dope, he'd have ended up a colonel."

"Soleràs, a colonel?"

"He was lucky, but he was a dope. It would take two weeks to tell you all the stupid things he did. They'd ~~thrown me out of another~~ ^{thrown me out of another} battalion a couple of months before. The major had gotten wind of what I was up to. He was a monarchist, a supporter of Alfonso XIII, and he suspected that I was keeping an eye on him. Anyhow, he made my life miserable ~~till he got me to ask for a transfer.~~ ^{and forced me to ask} Yes, I asked to be transferred to another battalion, but it was the same as if they'd thrown me out because if I hadn't requested it when I did, that camouflaged liberal, that pillar of Freemasonry wouldn't have just gotten rid of me but would have also demoted me. He was hellbent on it! He'd started proceedings and taken testimony from lieutenants and captains, who were

jealous of me and claimed I acted like a chicken during our attacks and counterattacks. A chicken, me! I've got more balls than any of them, you know, but they're always out to get me: petty jealous types trying to bury me beneath a mountain of lies. All together, it would take too long to explain--what can you expect from supporters of the Bourbons' liberal wing? They're all now or have been members of Masonic lodges! But after all, none of this has anything to do with Soleràs. The fact is they forced me to transfer to another battalion, and shortly after I arrived, they put Soleràs in charge of it. That's how by chance I ended up under his command during the last ^{few} months of the war. He gave me a desk job, but don't think it was so cushy! He knew I couldn't stand the trenches and took advantage of it. He amused himself by saying things that were hard for me to swallow, offensive cracks and nasty jokes, especially about Miranda's daughter."

It was the first time he'd introduced this character who, as I later discovered, obsessed him. Naturally, I had no idea who she was. He told me that just before the war, his father and hers had taken it into their heads to marry them because their properties were near each other and the girl was an only child.

"She didn't seem very excited about it, even though at the time she didn't know my father had mortgaged most of his lands or that I had an illegitimate brother. No one knew it at the time, and besides, she was going on thirty, but despite everything, that prospect of marriage left her cold. She was stuck-up because she'd gone to a boarding school run by the Sisters of Saint Maur in Lyons and had spent a lot of time in Paris. There she'd met a ne'er-do-well, a starving would-be painter who'd had shows but had never sold a picture. I don't know what the hell women want! In any case, it had been a mistake to educate her in a country as immoral as

France . . . Soleràs knew the whole story because I'd told him. Toward the end of the war I still assumed that once it was over we'd get married. Our fathers had painstakingly arranged everything. How could I have imagined she'd be so blind and obstinate? So I was sure she'd become my wife as soon as the war was over. But Soleràs always predicted the opposite. 'Poor Lamonedà,' he used to say, 'no one understands you. Women will never appreciate your qualities. They don't like to marry cuckolds.' 'What you're saying doesn't make sense,' I'd answer. 'How can anyone be a cuckold before he's even married?' 'Everything's possible in this world,' he'd say, 'and their intuition never fails them. It's amazing what they can intuit. Everyone knows about feminine intuition! I'd swear on a stack of Bibles that her intuition tells her you'll be a cuckold.' Yes, that's the way he talked. It was hard to swallow, but he was my commanding officer and I had to put up with it if I didn't want him to drag me out of that office and send me back to the trenches. So I kept my mouth shut and he kept ragging me about ~~the~~ ^{the} Miranda girl. One day I thought I'd get back at him by playing a little joke. We were always playing them; practical jokes were our daily bread. I'd found out he had a photo of a woman hidden at the bottom of his suitcase (I'm sure you realize that nothing in the others' suitcases escaped me, however carefully they thought they'd hidden it); a woman, but nothing special. I don't know what he saw in her. The rest of us collected girlie shots, which are always nice to look at. Blond, leggy movie stars, you know? I don't know why the hell movie stars always have such long legs. Maybe it's so there'll be more of them. Often, when the others weren't around we'd have some fun painting mustaches on their movie stars: stupid pranks, I know, but we all did it. Well, I decided to do the same with Soleràs's photo, which wasn't any movie star and which he'd hidden away so carefully. He caught me in

the act. If you could have seen him! Like a raving lunatic! He grabbed me by the lapels, shook me, flung me against the wall . . . And nonetheless, she was nothing special. She wasn't blond or leggy. In fact, you'd have taken her for a drab, overworked housewife. I don't understand what he saw in her. A sort of round face with beady eyes. I don't know how to put it! It's hard to describe a face when there's nothing special about it, and she was dressed like the exact opposite of a movie star. She looked like a schoolmarm, and as for me . . . no; that's not my type . . . those women who instead of showing their legs show you how to do algebra . . . uh uh . . . I don't want to hear about women who know it all! Give me sex appeal any time! And that was the photo Soleràs ^{hid} kept so ~~neatly~~ and carefully at the bottom of his suitcase. I told you he was nuts! But he was lucky! The last winter in the war . . ."

#

"The last winter in the war," the ghost had said. The last winter in the war, my God, what a mild winter that was! There was no ice or snow in the middle of January, not even on mountaintops. The fascists were ^{driving} pushing what was left of the Catalan brigades ^{after} from the battle of the Ebro toward the French border. Our battalion, which Picó commanded now that he'd been promoted to major, had been reduced to a handful of men as after the collapse of the Aragonese front and again led a ^{nomadic} wandering life, but hotly pursued by the enemy this time, always about to trap us. In the course of our wanderings, we ended up climbing Montsant till we reached a plateau that was nothing but bare rock. Rocks of Montsant, I'll never forget you! ^{as long as I live} It seemed impossible that all this was happening when the weather was so mild, the sky so blue. 1939 had begun, and we found ourselves on that rocky plateau. The Moors had camped below the mountains. They controlled all the passes. We were finally cut

off. For the first time in his life, Picó's instinct had failed him. We were caught like rats in a trap. When a few days later, the Moors started up all the trails at the same time, many of our soldiers tried to save themselves by jumping off cliffs. The cliffs on Montsant are sheer walls. Some survived; others . . . At night we could hear their groans, which sometimes were like howls, for hours on end, rising from those abysses. The peasants who lived nearby didn't dare to help them for fear of Moorish reprisals. It was such a relief, my God, when those howls finally stopped . . .

I don't know how, but Picó found an entrance to a big cave. That entrance was so small we had to crawl through it on our hands and knees. There were only seven of us left, including him. We lived for a few days in that remarkable hideout, maybe four or five, I couldn't say for sure because we lost all sense of time. We couldn't see each other. Our eyes never got used to the pitch blackness. We stayed huddled together to keep from getting lost in that darkness which we guessed was immense and full of pits and labyrinths. There was plenty of water, and we still had a few crusts of bread in our knapsacks. When we'd finished the last one, we decided to venture out.

It was an oddly balmy night for the middle of January, and how the Milky Way sparkled above that rocky plateau! There was no moon, and nonetheless we were dazzled when we staggered forth. That broad plateau was deserted. There wasn't a living soul, nothing but silence. The front, we found out later, had been pushed far to our northeast, toward Barcelona. Without knowing it, we found ourselves in enemy territory. Maybe someday I'll tell the story of how Picó led the six of us through our occupied country till we rejoined the Catalan forces. We rejoined them in time for the last battles. When we reached Coll d'Ares, where in February there wasn't a single patch of snow, when we reached the ridge

between Molló and Prats de Molló, between the two parts of Catalonia,
between France and Spain, Picó sat down on the boundary stone marking
the border and, turning ^{to} ~~toward~~ the south with tears in his eyes, muttered,
"This is the end of culture . . ."

Someday I'll tell this whole story and how the remains of so many
pulverized brigades straggled onto that ridge, all mixed together: regular
brigades and volunteers, ^{Catalanists} ~~nationalists~~ and Communists, anarchists and
Christian Democrats, republicans and socialists, syndicalists and federalists,
an indescribable jumble of ~~entire~~ ^{clue} disordered brigades and divisions, of
mules and trucks, artillery and machine guns we had to throw away and
that piled up in the ravines. And suddenly, rising from that vast jumble,
we all sang Verdaguer's ^{hymn} ~~poem~~ to the Virgin Mary, gazing out at those
smoking cities, towns, and villages, amid the dying rays of a February
sunset, before continuing our march, now downward and northward, into
exile.

#

So here this ghost thought I'd been on his side, was sure I couldn't
have been anything else, and continued in his monotone, "'We'll be in
Barcelona within a month,' we all said. I imagined myself back in my
house, in my father's house, living high on the hog and lording it over
everybody. My father ^{had} ~~to~~ just died, I'd marry the Miranda girl, our ~~tenant~~
~~farmer~~ and hired hands would have to look sharp or they'd get a swift
kick in the pants. She still hadn't married that would-be painter, and as
they hadn't opened my father's will since they were waiting for me to
show up, we didn't know anything about all those mortgages and that
illegitimate brother he'd left me to remember him by. As far as the lease
was concerned, I thought like a fool that it'd be easy getting it cancelled
since it had been signed when the Reds were in charge. How could we

have guessed the supreme court would still be run by liberals and Freemasons, as if nothing had happened? I was his one and only heir, and I'd arrive transformed into a hero. They hadn't promoted me during the war, but I was a second lieutenant. A second lieutenant's something, god damn it; watch your step! I've always lived in a dream world . . . I can't help it. I'm an idealist! To tell the truth, I'd thought the war was a pain. All I cared about was that moment, the moment I'd enter my village in riding boots, holding a whip, wearing an impeccable second lieutenant's uniform, like a hero"--and the hero stuck his finger in his nose and dug around obstinately--. "That's why I was so displeased when the top brass called a halt to our offensive."

"A halt to your offensive?"

Silence followed this question.

X ^{thing} "Soleràs had guessed the reason." That monotone took up its soliloquy again. "Yes, he saw it more clearly than I did. He was a dope, but often he saw [^] more clearly than anyone. They could have ended the war, for example, in 1937, when the anarchists rose up against the Catalan government and left whole stretches of the Aragonese front almost entirely undefended. But why should they have ended it? The longer it lasted, the more the anarchists carried on in Barcelona, the happier people would be to see us. A moment would come when they'd be so sick of the war and the anarchists that our triumphal entrance would seem like a dream come true! So it was worth making them wait; yes, it was definitely worthwhile! It was Soleràs who saw it, who understood why they halted our offensives when we could have rolled straight on to Barcelona: the one in 1938, for example, which smashed through hundreds of miles of front. Hunger and the bombing raids had made Barcelona a living hell. Let them suffer for a while! The longer that hell lasted, the more overjoyed they'd

be to see us! We could have even dragged it out a couple more years if Hitler hadn't been in a hurry. He wanted to finish that meal before starting in on a much bigger one, a real banquet! Well, Soleràs had foreseen all that and because he talked this kind of talk everyone thought he was a jerk. And he was. What a jerk he could be . . . One night he pulled me aside. He often pulled me aside for long chats. He and I were the only Catalans in the battalion, and that was a link between us. I already told you there were hardly any Catalans because they all went over to the enemy. We had long chats and I put up with his taunts as long as he let me keep my desk job. Trench life didn't agree with me, you see, and if I'd wanted to be a martyr I wouldn't have left Barcelona. I could have stayed there like my pigheaded uncle"--and the ghost chuckled--
 X "So Soleràs pulled me aside. For a few days he'd been acting crazier than usual, insulting me more often, making nastier cracks about Miranda's daughter, but I thought, 'Sticks and stones will break my bones. As long as you don't send me back to the trenches, Major Shitface . . .'" And besides, I couldn't have done my job if I hadn't worked in an office: an extremely delicate job I'd already done in much more important places; at the very top, imagine! But the eternal backbiting, the lies, the snares to trip me up . . . yes, they'd gradually pushed me onto the sidelines till they finally buried me in a small-time battalion. Soleràs, like all the officers, had no idea that I was on a special mission. My mission couldn't have succeeded if they'd suspected me. We did our work so well and so discreetly that Himmler himself once congratulated us. Soleràs might have caught wind of something, but either he didn't really get it or pretended not to . . . or didn't give a damn, which was quite possible considering it was him. Those last days, he wouldn't let up with his cracks about the girl. I could see he was jumpy, in a weird mood, I mean weirder than

X before. He pulled me aside and ^{led} ~~took~~ me outside the camp. 'Lamoneda,' he said, 'we weren't born to win. It's written all over us. Don't kid yourself: victors don't look like you and me. You can't see what you look like, no one can see what he looks like, and that ~~is~~ ^{is} damned lucky.' He hung onto my arm because he was shaking. He'd had too much to drink that evening, something he did more and more ~~often~~ ^{often} toward the end. As he talked, he peered into my eyes and I could feel his breath on my face: such boozy breath that if I'd lit a match he would have burst into flames. He defied me with that look and that breath. 'What I'm planning to do,' he said, 'I'm going to do right in front of your nose so you'll realize I don't give a shit.' I glanced behind me. The two of them were there . . ."

"The two of them?"

The ghost fell into an uneasy silence. After a while he glared at me resentfully and added, in a hoarse voice, "Why are you so interested in Soleràs? After all, he was nothing but a dope. I was getting sick of his blather. That business with Ibrahim had already happened. That night he jabbered on and on, 'You have to understand, Lamoneda,' he said, 'you and I may be a couple of morons, I won't argue with you about that, but that's where we're from . . . Didn't you tell me you'd read every word Stendhal ever wrote. There's a passage in Stendhal that fits your side to a tee . . .' He often took it into his head to talk about my 'side,' as if he hadn't changed sides himself, as if he'd forgotten that now he was on my side too. 'Listen to what Stendhal had to say: "une rage sauvage les animait, surtout ils n'entendaient pas un mot de cette belle langue du Midi et leur fureur en était redoublée; ils croyaient gagner le ciel en tuant les Provençaux . . ." 'I haven't killed any Provençals! You're crazy!' I shouted. 'What? You mean you never noticed this passage? Well, it's in On Love, and I thought On Love was your bible! After all, a Provençal is more or

X less . . . a dead cat can also be a very ^{fit to drink} notable; the only relatives one can choose are one's wife and one's cat . . . 'But what does a dead cat have to do with Stendhal?' 'Nothing. It's just that back then it was the Albigenses. Doesn't that word ring a bell? You're like that minister of education, Parisian through and through, who once visited Avignon, where they showed him the castle the popes had lived in. "But," he exclaimed in astonishment, "I've never heard anything about popes in Avignon!" Cats, on the other hand, when they go on crusades, something that invariably occurs in the month of January . . . Hell, I don't even know what I was talking about. Haven't you ever heard their moonlit concerts of meows in January? It's a crusade, you see, but only for cats. If you want to take things to an extreme, you can choose not only your wife and cat but your child, employing the legal fiction we call adoption. But a cat? O no, not on your life; a cat never betrays his home and country! Never, never! We found them in those villages in the deserted valley, in the middle of no man's land. Each cat had stayed put, faithful to what everyone else had forsaken. Sometimes, when we entered one of those abandoned houses at night, we'd see in the dark, at the back of the kitchen, standing guard beside the cold fireplace, two little green flames . . . Pussycats are a thousand times better than you and me!' 'But Soleràs, I assume you don't intend . . . ' 'No one can make another's cat his own. With women, we've figured out a trick to get someone else's wife through the fiction we call divorce, just as we can possess someone else's child through adoption, but a cat? Never! You can't adopt someone else's cat! He'll run away and go home . . . Pussycats are a thousand times better than all of us put together! Pussycats and aunts; yes, aunts. Aunts are faithful to the bitter end! Have you noticed that the only adoption recognized by law is of a child, just as the sole divorce is between husband and wife? You can't

adopt someone else's aunt or divorce your own! An aunt is forever, like a cat. I lived with mine up until the war and I assure you, Lamonedà, that I wouldn't trade her for all the aunts on earth. To each his own!' So you can see how much malarkey Soleràs could talk once he got going, and even so I had to be grateful that he didn't start in ^{about} ~~on~~ Miranda's daughter. 'I don't know why,' he'd say, 'but I imagine Miranda's daughter must be a real bombshell.' 'She is,' I answered, 'and especially her legs . . .' 'That's what I figured: a terrific pair of gams. If you actually get to marry her, you'll see your ancestral home fill up with friends.' 'Friends? I don't have any friends.' 'But you will have; don't worry. With gams like those . . .' He was always, taunting me, trying to get on my nerves; and besides, I had grave suspicions, you know, because of that ~~funny~~ ^{business} with Captain Ibrahim . . . I didn't want him to put me on the spot with some other stunt. I knew he was capable of anything, and I was sick and tired of his crap."

"Captain Ibrahim . . ." I said. "Who was Captain Ibrahim?"

"You want to stick your nose into everything, don't you? Maybe you think . . ."

"What do you expect me to think if I've never even heard of this Captain Ibrahim? Anyway, I hardly knew Soleràs; "--I lied again--"I met him by chance and didn't have much to do with him. It was his aunt I got to know because of a miracle Saint Philomena had supposedly performed. That's all there was to it; I already told you."

These words must have reassured him because he sighed and asked, "Could you buy me another croissant?"

#

"We'd gotten quite far from camp," his monotonous voice declared, resuming its soliloquy, "when Soleràs said, 'Now, Lamonedà, everyone talks

about Spanish atrocities, everyone points to us in horror. Just wait a little while and this'll look like kid stuff. I've lived in Germany and I know what they're like. You'll see: it's the most civilized country on earth. They're going to do things you never dreamed of! Take note of this prophecy, Lamonedà, and remember me when you see it come true.' One of Soleràs's peculiarities was prophesying, prophesying about everything and anything, prophecies that made no sense! He prophesied some of the most ridiculous nonsense . . . Anyhow, that time he was right. Yes, he guessed the war was finally going to end because Hitler was in a hurry. That's when he said, 'He wants to finish this meal before starting in on a much bigger one; that's why he's so impatient. And what a meal! A real banquet! This is going to look like nothing! A snack ^{by} ~~in~~ comparison!' And he predicted that in no time we'd be in Barcelona. 'But listen,' he added, 'this imminent triumph changes all my perspectives. You can count me out of your victory march through Barcelona.' 'What do you mean?' 'That you can count me out!' he shouted furiously. 'And it'd be better if you kept out of that glorious circus too . . . You think you and I can enter like conquering heroes? It'd be like cuckolding our own fathers. You'll say it's a big mess there. Well, so is this! To each his own mess . . . and ours is the other one . . . If I'd thought your side was going to win, I never would have joined you.' I was getting annoyed and said 'I'll be hanged if I can understand what you're getting at, Soleràs.' 'Lamoneda,' he replied, 'all you care about is Miranda's daughter and deep down you're nothing but a . . . ' 'A what?' 'A horny son of a bitch. Don't get mad. We're all the same; we've all got ^{them} ~~that~~ sticking out of our foreheads. Compared to that, saving our skins doesn't make much difference. Lots of insects are ready and willing to die for it. Our skins aren't our own. They've been used over and over. Since organic matter doesn't change, we hand it down

to each other: plants, animals, and men. If I eat a steak, the steak turns into Soleràs. If you'd eaten the same steak, it would have turned into Lamonedà. That was what made hard-working, upright cavemen turn to cannibalism. Because it's a truly amazing thing that if I eat you, what had been Lamonedà will turn into Soleràs. Let the materialists explain that one! Matter is always the same, a suit handed down from one living creature to another for millions of centuries.' 'What you're saying is bullshit, Soleràs.' 'I'm referring to the fabric, not the cut,' he answered. 'The cut's a more subtle matter. The cut's more personal, a family affair. For example, as far as styling's concerned, I'm a copy of a great-grandfather I know nothing about. They won't let us choose the cut any more than the fabric. We have to wear predetermined suits, whether we like them or not.' 'You're talking drivel.' 'We transmit our forms from parents to children. This power of transmission goes to our heads, and rightly so! For an instant we're almost the same as God! But our power is limited to form; nothing more than form. Neither spirit nor matter! A form, and that's it; like what they call a ghost. Most people don't realize. Lucky for them, because if you start brooding over it you'll get the migraine headache of your life! The more you puzzle over it the more you sense that we're nothing but forms, evanescent phantoms. The water we drink has been drunk thousands of times, or rather millions of times since the ~~Early Precambrian Era~~ by millions and millions of plants, animals, and human beings. I know something about it, because for I while I was reading up on geology. If you make an effort and use your imagination, you'll end up feeling an unbearable nausea. The water's always the same. The vast oceans have been drunk and pissed a thousand times! Lamonedà, all you do is drink what I piss.'"

At that moment, the ghost interrupted himself to ask me what time it was because he didn't have a watch. I then realized to my surprise that we'd been there for three hours, three hours in which he'd kept up his droning soliloquy.

"He was off his rocker," he continued. "Too bad it's so late. I could tell you hundreds of them. He talked non-stop gibberish. 'So much fuss over nothing,' he told me, 'so much fuss when one slight change in our reproductive behavior would pull the rug out from under three thousand years of literature. If there were three sexes instead of two, for example . . . You laugh, Lamonedá. It's funny how numbskulls always bust a gut laughing at the idea of a third sex. Why does the idea give you numbskulls so much pleasure? Because believe me, it's no laughing matter. If we reproduce through two sexes, that's contingent, not necessary. There are plenty of fissiparous species among the lower orders; it could have continued up into the higher ones and then . . . Farewell, Miranda's daughter's sexy gams; farewell, Stendhal. Farewell, On Love, farewell! Why don't fissiparous species make you numbskulls laugh? It's astonishing how the idea of a third sex makes you happy, whereas fissiparousness puts you in a bad mood . . . What's the big difference? They're all types of reproduction. But let's stick to our subject, which as you'll recall was dead cats.' 'Dead cats again?' 'Didn't I tell you that under certain circumstances they can be very ~~drinkable~~ ^{fit to drink}. We were talking about dead cats, adoption, divorce, all that crap.' And he repeated several times, 'Adoption, divorce, what crap, what a bunch of dead cats.' 'But why is that crap?' 'Crap fit for teenage romances, sugarcoated shit.' I'm just quoting exactly what he said: sugarcoated shit. I'd gradually caught on that he had what they call a complex, a kind of chink in his character, that showed up in his railing against adoption and divorce. He'd go nuts when he talked about them, and

X he talked about them a lot. What was he: the adopted son of a divorced couple or something? I often suspected as much, but I never did get it straight. He ~~dragged out~~ ^{went on with} his peroration, 'Fairy tales to make us think storks bring babies . . . How could someone else's child be yours; how could someone else's wife be your wife? As if all that . . . as if . . . as if one could escape one's own obscenity! Maybe you could even escape your own, but someone else's? The other's shadow would always come between you . . . I'd rather be fissiparous than put up with that!'"

X Lamonedá winked at me again and poked the middle button on my cassock, "I'm just repeating his exact words, 'How could you sleep with someone else's wife? Can't you see the other's shadow would always get in the way?' He was off his rocker. When it comes to females, I'm the opposite of Soleràs; I'm up and ready, ~~hmmmm~~ ^h; as far as I'm concerned, hell, any female, as long as she's got good . . . mmm . . . Even if she's slept with every guy in town, with Nebuchadnezzar in person! As long as she's got ~~hmm~~ ^h . . . But I was fed up with that lunatic. He'd already got me in trouble on account of his shenanigans with Captain Ibrahim. Oof, that was a bizarre story."

g "So in fact there was someone named Captain Ibrahim?"

the ~~drunkable~~ ^{potable} one he was talking about."

"Ibrahim?"

Once again he glanced at me mistrustfully as though trying to decide how much to tell me, and then he chuckled again. "Bah, that's war! What's the point of talking about it? Basically Soleràs was a jerk: that's the long and short of it. It's not worth bothering about. He left; that's what happened."

"He left? To go where?"

X "To rejoin his old pals. Luckily, I'd taken the precaution of having those two characters follow me, men I could trust. He didn't notice them discreetly shadowing us, and I . . . I kept them in sight . . . ~~hamm . . .~~ but why stir up the past? What's the point? Let's forget about Soleràs. I'm tired."

"You say he left . . ."

"I'm tired. I'm sick of talking about the past! That's enough Soleràs! He made for the Reds' lines and I haven't heard from him since. That's enough about him! What time is it?"

I told him the time again, and all of sudden he acted surprised that it was so late.

"I have to get going. I can't waste any more time. They're waiting for me in court."

"I didn't know you were a lawyer."

"I'm not a pharmacist either," he sighed, "but I make a little money as a witness."

"As a . . ."

"Don't get the wrong idea; it pays starvation wages. Before the war it wasn't so bad. There were only a few of us, so we could get along. Now the whole profession's gone down the drain. Too much competition! Nobody's willing to stick together! Scabs drive down the prices, ready to testify to anything for next to nothing."

He'd gotten up and winked at me roguishly again. "I don't know why," and he leaned over to whisper in my ear, "but I get the impression you're disillusioned too. People like us should get together more often. Give me your address."

I told him, lying, that I didn't have one at the moment, that I slept wherever I could while I waited to be assigned.

"Like me," he said. "That's what I thought. I've also just barely kept my head above water these last few months. But I still have that "garçonnière" from before the war. Do you remember? You were up there a few times ~~when~~ ^{and} I read you passages from my novels. Now, with the rent freeze, it's dirt cheap and that's why I can hang onto it. I've fixed it up like an artist's garret."--and he winked at me again--"Stop by some time. We can have a long chat. Those of us who are disillusioned should organize . . ."

And since I seemed evasive, he added as bait, "If you come I promise to tell you lots of other stories about Soleràs. I even have a notebook he kept . . ."

And saying this, he made his way toward the fishbowl, turning around to wink at me once more, and I remembered the vision I'd had that day when Picó had blown up the bridge and all the troop carriers crossing it and I'd ~~stared~~ ^{gazed into} at that red sunset. The ghost slipped away, winking, and disappeared into the outdoors beyond the glass. He'd fled Barcelona in September, but Doctor Gallifa hadn't disappeared till November. The dates didn't fit, so my vision had been false, and nonetheless . . . nonetheless his ghostly presence--Did he even exist? Mightn't he have been an essence without existence; that is, a symbol?--had left a subtle scent of carrion in the air.

II

I'd only spent a few weeks in that refugee camp in France. What good could I have done outside my own country? I asked for permission to return. They held me for nine months in another camp. At the time prison camps were sprouting from one end of the earth to the other, from Algarve to Kamchatka. I wasn't able to return to Barcelona till almost a year after the war ended. Once there, I finished my studies. After that the sequence gets mixed up in my memory. I do have a clear recollection of the time of year and what the weather was like when certain things occurred. For example, when I had that unexpected encounter in a café on the Ronda de Sant Pau, it was a damp, gray day toward the end of December. But what year was it: 1942, 1943? I would have liked not to see him again; I found him too upsetting. Everything about him was so sinister, so ambiguous. What was he doing, what had he done, who gave him orders, what were his intentions? Was he just mentally disturbed, perhaps on account of all the cocaine he'd taken, someone lost in his fantasies, trying to project an enigmatic image he thought was romantic? This was more or less what Doctor Gallifa had always suspected. The one thing that might have made me seek him out was my wish to hear more about Soleràs and his uncle, but it wasn't as strong as the disgust he inspired in me.

As for his uncle, shortly after that ghostly conversation, I heard from the anarchist's widow. She'd moved out of her apartment on Arc del Teatre Street a few months after the war had ended, so by the time I'd gotten back to Barcelona she was no longer there. She hadn't told her neighbors where she was going, so her trail seemed as lost as thousands of others in those years of enormous confusion. My efforts to locate her had

come to nothing. But one fine day, perhaps three years later, she wrote to Doctor Gallifa's brother, who in turn got in touch with me.

Now she's dead. She died not long ago. Then--in 1943? in 1944?--she was about sixty and still worked as a cleaning woman. Her name was Alberta, and she'd moved in with one of her nieces so she wouldn't be so alone. She said she'd been out of touch all those years because she hadn't really wanted to see anyone. What she'd had to witness during the war and after it had left her feeling cut off from the world. Now she felt more like herself again and wanted to tell us--was anxious to tell us--everything she knew about Doctor Gallifa, and especially certain strange phenomena related to him that had occurred continually since the day he'd disappeared.

The little apartment in Hostafrancs where she lived with her niece was very modest, of course, but cozy. The niece, who looked to be about forty, was as convinced as Alberta that these phenomena were real. Though at the time I felt rather skeptical about his supposed miracles, I was eager to find out what his last days had been like.

One evening at the end of November 1936 a woman they didn't know had showed up at his attic. Alberta had pulled Doctor Gallifa aside. 'Don't trust anyone you don't know.' 'She says someone on his deathbed sent her.' 'What if it's a trap? Don't take chances. All kinds of things have happened . . . ' 'As long as I have a little snuff,' he ~~2~~ joked, 'I can keep going for a while.' Because ~~in truth~~ ^{then} he was exhausted.

~~Having said this~~ ^{Then} he headed for the toilet. In that building there was one on each floor, and at the moment it was occupied. He had to wait awhile. The poor man had to go a lot toward the end. I think it must have been that filthy snuff that gave him dysentery, especially since he'd started living on wormy beans. If I gave him bread or rice, he'd trade

them for snuff . . . I felt sorry for him, so old and worn-out. The woman was waiting for him downstairs by the front door. Everything was dark because of the air raids. You had to grope your way along the narrow streets in our neighborhood. From the front entrance, I watched him walk away arm in arm with that woman. They walked arm in arm so as to avoid suspicion. They were still hunting down priests at the end of November . . ."

X He'd walked away, arm in arm with a woman he didn't know, like an old customer with one of the whores on Arc del Teatre Street, into that pitch blackness. His last words to Alberta were odd. "Ask everyone to forgive my bad sermons," ~~she says he~~ *she said he'd* told her as they said goodbye at the entrance. He was eighty years old. No one's heard anything else about him.

X Soon afterward, according to Alberta, those inexplicable occurrences began: hopeless illnesses suddenly cured and other mysterious favors obtained by people ~~he knew who had~~ *who'd known him and* prayed to him, asking him to intercede. Every night she asked him to watch over her. At that moment, the supposedly miraculous acts she recounted weren't so extraordinary that they couldn't have been due to chance, and I didn't attribute much importance to them, or rather I remained skeptical. As far as commending herself to him, I did that myself and told her so. Alberta was very relieved to hear it, because she said she'd feared that it might be sinful to pray to someone without knowing for sure if he was dead or alive.

That business with the X-rays didn't happen till 1950, some years later. One of the niece's sisters-in-law had cancer and the doctor only gave her a few weeks to live when Alberta suggested that she pray to Doctor Gallifa. The tumor, which had been perfectly visible on previous X-rays, suddenly disappeared. The doctor, who'd scoffed at miracles, was stunned. He was now the most impatient of us all; he personally took the

X-rays to the ^{arch}bishop. He couldn't understand why I wasn't very eager to support his campaign. Yes, we'll go, I thought, we'll go. We won't hide our light under a bushel. We'll testify on his behalf, but this young doctor, so incredulous a few days ago and now struck by the incomprehensible as by a bolt of lightning: what will he think of us ~~and~~ ^{that}? Of all the bureaucratic routines and paperwork to declare someone a saint? This miracle will get lost in an ocean of paperwork, poor miracle . . .

And it was then, on account of my testimony, that I again saw Lamonedá.

#

Like all Doctor Gallifa's relatives, he'd come to testify. They summoned all his friends and relatives, anyone who'd known him and could say something about him.

And there he was, among the friends and relatives, with a sly look on his face. What could he testify to, what was he doing there? Since he was incapable of believing in miracles, why did he waste his time listening to the interminable testimony of distant aunts and nebulous cousins, clinging to family ties that were lost in the mists of geneology? Lamonedá made a big deal out of the most trifling details to get them to ask more questions. He made up amazing tales, determined not to be outdone in supernatural phenomena. Yes, it's sad to say, ^{that} ~~but~~ he invented miracles--and what stupid miracles--to attract attention, to make sure he got a piece of that fabulous pie: glory, which for him consisted of getting his name in the newspapers.

We'd all gather in the waiting room in that palace I knew so well and that I've been to so many times since; that vast waiting room with its heavy furniture from the end of the last century: Mesopotamian sofas and armchairs dripping passementerie, all entombed in a warm, heavy penumbra

X pervaded by a smell like that of camphor. During our long waits, the family members scrutinized each other on the sly, as though taking each others' measure, and conversed in whispers. When the archbishop entered, silence fell. He'd always appear alone and unannounced, emerging from a little door papered like the walls. He'd look at us with that look of his, the look of someone who doesn't understand but wishes he did. Years later, he was struck down by a brutal stroke. Old and infirm, he no longer had to be the colonel-archbishop (an army colonel) who'd arrived, with as much energy as incomprehension, shortly after the war. Now, as I write this, he's been dead for months. The last few times I saw him, his waxy skin and frozen smile made him look like a corpse. His illness, his age, his disillusionments had transformed him. At the end, when in his presence I could already catch the scent of his impending death, I was surprised by a memory of what he'd been like in 1950, that shepherd unable to understand his sheep.

He'd appear suddenly, unannounced, alone, noiselessly in that hidden doorway and listen to us for a moment till we noticed his presence and fell silent. "What's the matter?" he'd ask. "Has someone forbidden you to speak Spanish?" Years later, struck by apoplexy or ~~divine~~ grace, old and worn out, he'd exhaust himself in obscure, obstinate battles in his flock's defense, trying to undo the harm he himself had done when his ignorance of the diocese into which he'd fallen in such unwonted fashion was unshakeable. In 1950, he found it inconceivable that anyone in the world would speak differently than he did except out of sheer orneriness. It took a quarter of a century for God's grace, aided by a stroke, to shake his convictions. He was, as I came to understand once I'd gotten to know him, good as gold but incredibly stupid and stubborn. At first his sheep took him for a wolf, but actually he was a mule.

X He was good as gold, by my God, he was so stupid! O Lord,
sometimes You send ~~you~~^{us} saints who are fools when this world needs saints
as clear-sighted as Doctor Gallifa! Years later I understood him, and once
I'd understood him I began to love him. I understood him all of a sudden,
as if my eyes had suddenly opened to the fact that what I'd thought was
a mystery of iniquity was actually a mystery of narrow-mindedness. I know
that now--thirty years later!--it'll seem that I'm making this up, but
persons in whose word I have complete trust told me that at the
X beginning, one time when His Grace had gone out for a ~~walk~~^{stroll} in the Gothic
Quarter with some relatives, they chanced to pass a crowd of children on
their way to school. His Grace stopped and listened to them, with a more
and more shocked look on his face, till he finally couldn't help exclaiming,
"So young, and they already speak Catalan!"

He wasn't a mystery of iniquity; he was the more modest mystery
embodied in Calderón's Portuguese hidalgo. What I'm about to say will
perhaps give a fairer idea of what he was like. I witnessed it myself. It
was a while after I'd returned from the Caribbean, when His Grace often
summoned me to his palace because he'd come to feel a fatherly concern
for my welfare. He had to go out and we were in the courtyard. We'd both
gotten in his car, but the chauffeur was having trouble starting it and
cursed under his breath. "Don't say that," His Grace responded, "Instead
say 'Lord, please help me.'" The car immediately started. His Grace
X exclaimed, "Heavens! If I hadn't seen it I wouldn't believe it!"

X When I returned from the Caribbean, when he embraced me to
welcome me back to his diocese, I saw tears in his eyes: his beady peasant
eyes that had never seen the sea till they appointed him ~~bishop~~^{arch}. And I
heard him murmur as he embraced me, "My son, what harm would it do to
preach in Castilian? Do you think we're devils?" It was then that I

X suddenly understood: he wasn't wicked but stupid to an incredible degree
for someone ~~who was bishop~~ ^{change of} in one of the world's densest and most
complex dioceses.

At that time he'd kept intact all the ideas he'd arrived with, and he
tried to nudge the witnesses' testimony in this direction. For him, Doctor
Gallifa had to be a "martyr in our crusade," a "hero in the national cause."
He was astonished when everyone without exception, even Lamonedá, told
him that Doctor Gallifa had never been interested in politics, that he'd
stubbornly refused to flee "Red territory," and that he'd gone on
administering the sacraments to everyone without exception. "Even to
Reds?" he exclaimed in amazement. "Even though they'd been
excommunicated?" His shock reached its climax when he finally
understood--and it took him a long time--the most astonishing fact of all.

f 2X "But are you trying to make me believe that Father Gallifa didn't speak
~~Christian?~~ ^{conocida} The idea that Doctor Gallifa might have spoken like a
character in Gente bien was so unexpected that even Lamonedá burst out
laughing.

#

X As far as I was concerned, the passing years and disillusionments had
filled me with bitterness. I'd turned into a surly, hunted animal that felt
more and more trapped. My aversion toward certain persons had festered
with time, like a sore one keeps scratching till it turns into a malignant
cancer. My God, what monster was inside me? Whereas before I'd seen evil
nowhere, now I saw it everywhere. The worst part of the postwar period
was the part I carried around inside me. If only someone could have given
me back the dark storms I'd lived through when I was twenty, those
storms that were sometimes so terribly dry but that suddenly ^{burst into} melted in a
flood of tears!

My aunt Llúcia . . . in 1950 she thought she'd voluntarily embraced poverty in the Lord's service. The falling pesseta, combined with the rent freeze, had reduced her real income--nominally the same--to a tenth or less of what it had been. She, however, refused to admit this and, finding herself like so many of the elderly who must live on fixed incomes, she believed ~~that~~ ^{her} acts of charity had ruined her.

At the time, I never went to see her. It was she who sometimes came to the mountain village where, after my return from America, I'd settled in as a country priest. She came in the same big black car she'd always had, driven by the same old uniformed chauffeur, since inasmuch as everything in this world is relative, the Christian poverty in which she thought she lived didn't stop her from keeping her car and chauffeur. She was no longer concerned about the lack of vocations. For her, this problem had ceased to exist at the same time as the republic, though it was after the war that the problem ^{had} become acute in many rural parishes ^{without} ~~priests~~. Now she'd consecrated herself to another edifying campaign: her ^{Domestic} ~~Internal~~ Missions or ^{DM} ~~IM~~. She and other elderly women, all spinsters like herself, visited the shantytowns that had sprung up around Barcelona. They went to teach Christian doctrine, though actually these spinsters' strong point was teaching the women who lived in those shacks how respectable wives should behave in society.

Sometimes when she came to visit she'd get so carried away by her enthusiasm that she'd start preaching sermons to me, forgetting she was in a rectory. I must admit that my wobbly table, ~~tattered old~~ ^{broken} straw chair, and mattress on the floor might have confused her and made her think she was in a shack. Country priests had never been so poor. Later, as soon as I could, I got rid of that mattress and now have a bed like everyone else so as not to scandalize those who might think I was trying to play the role

X of a saint. I got rid of it reluctantly, because I loved that mattress. I slept so well on it! Like in the war . . . When, after a grueling Sunday (four mountain parishes, widely separated, require a lot of walking) I curled up beneath the blankets, the cotton blankets we'd also had back then, how happy it made me to hear the ~~crunching~~ ^{rustling} straw in the mattress and the scurrying mice till sleep bore me away into those hours of intense peace that can be found only in war; like that night, a night that so often comes back to me, at the end of fall 1938, two or three months before the end, a cold, rainy night when we had to take a strongly fortified camp on top of a treeless mountain. We had to advance up a steep slope, without tanks or artillery, for five hundred yards without vegetation. Toward the end all our battles were hopeless. Picó proposed a "scientific plan." "With a minimum of scientific method," he said, "if we spread out in small groups covering each other alternately and protected by machine gun fire . . ."

"Come off it, Picó," the oldest captain interrupted. "We'll charge all at once, blindly, like a bunch of illiterate morons. We've done it so many times before! It's cognac that wins battles!" We advanced in the dark, through the rain. I followed behind with the stretcher-bearers. Every officer, every soldier, had a canteen full of coffee and cognac--in almost equal proportions--that we had to gulp down in one swig before charging. I felt more nausea than terror. Picó was the only one who'd refused his ration of alcohol. He led his battalion, on his hands and knees like the rest of us, and just at ~~this~~ ^{that} moment a liason arrived from our brigade with an order. The attack had been called off. In the little valley where we took shelter, we found some barns with straw. What a good night's sleep, what peace, how warm and soft that straw mixed with goat and sheep droppings felt, what a pleasant goatish smell, how comforting to still be alive . . . How much less alone the raindrops on the barn's leaky tiles

X

made me feel, along with that smell of goats and that scratchy blanket, like a grandmother's rough hand . . .

X But ~~my~~ ^{that} Aunt Lúcia: how could she know about ~~this~~? How could she know the wondrous peace that can only be found in the heart of war or poverty? I even enjoyed seeing the disgust in her eyes at that mattress on the floor. She scolded me with cloying sweetness, urging me to change my ways and stop being a "rebel."

"The harm you could do! The scandal!"

She couldn't sit still. Every five minutes she glanced at her watch. She always had so much to do, was in such a hurry to get home. She was almost eighty but hadn't changed since my first memories of her when she was fifty. She'd embalmed herself forever. She was a mummy, but a mummy caught up in a flurry of activity. She'd get up, walk over to the battered shelves in a corner where I kept my few books, and look at the titles on their spines. She'd seen them often enough, but each time she started. "Are you reading this?" She'd gaze at me with infinite compassion. Sometimes you'd have thought she took me for someone else, that she believed I belonged to the Communist Party. She'd tell me pointedly and insistently about all the bizarre things she claimed were occurring in Russia. To hear her talk, one would have thought young lieutenants in the Red Army raped ninety-year-old women (perhaps, I ended up thinking, she hoped she wasn't too old to be raped), yet this didn't seem to go with her descriptions of Russian women's unbridled lust, which made them, from the age of ten or twelve on, the world's most insatiable nymphomaniacs. She declared that she'd learned all this from unimpeachable sources, and who knows if she hadn't gotten it out of some magazine published by nuns, because ~~in that period~~ ^{at time} they printed all kinds of things . . .

X

When, a few years later, the first Russian satellite caused such a

sensation, my aunt refused to believe it. In Russia there were only hordes, the famous "Red hordes," so she found a Russian sputnik as incredible as if a tribe of New Guinean cannibals had launched it. Later, as the Russians continued their space program, I couldn't ~~resist~~ ^{long} the ~~malicious pleasure~~ ^{temptation} I ~~got from talking~~ ^{to talk} about it with my aunt whenever she visited me. One day I told her I wouldn't be surprised if the Russians sent astronauts to the moon or even Mars or Venus. She gazed at me pityingly.

"I don't believe anyone else in our family's ever been interested in this astronomical nonsense."

The family! It was still her god. That's why she resented me so much. In her eyes, I was nothing but a traitor: a traitor to our holy family, which I'd had nothing to do with since the war. And nonetheless, who was her family? What was left of it? Monsignor Pinell de Bray had died some years back. I'd let her down, so who was left? Well, she'd managed to rebuild her family. She hadn't rested till she'd found another nephew to fill the place I'd occupied. She'd found one who was ~~barely~~ ^{almost} twenty years old, a certain Raül de Valldemil, a nephew once removed (the son of one of her cousins), from an poor but aristocratic branch--poor because of ill-advised speculation in German marks after the First World War. My aunt thought she'd found in this nephew, who was poor but with a glorious name (glorious in her eyes, I mean), the very quintessence of the romantic idea she'd formed of our family, an idea derived from God knows what naive and nebulous concept of "Christian chivalry" she'd picked up from the books she'd read in a Catholic boarding school at the age of thirteen or fourteen and that had marked her for life. This Raül de Valldemil was as tall, slender, blond, and blue-eyed as his novelistic name promised, and my aunt enlisted him in her edifying campaigns as she'd once enlisted me. She always praised him to the skies when she visited me, she spoke of

that "boy"'s angelic innocence--she thought of him as a "boy," a nineteen-year-old boy!--and acted very touched by how fond Raül had grown of her. Everything went smoothly till she founded her "Home for Christian Training" or HCF, one of her most brilliant strokes of genius. In her rage to always be doing something, to organize, to control, she'd taken some thirty girls from the shantytowns into her home in Sarrià in 1952 or 1953 with the intention of turning them into proper mothers. "I want to make them proper mothers in the full sense of the word," she said, a goal that was fulfilled, in one case, with unexpected ease but not exactly thanks to my aunt.

She was beside herself. "They're incorrigible, they're like animals . . ." A more unexpected and painful turn of events awaited her: Raül offered to marry the girl. "But what have you got to do with her?" "Aunt Llàcia, you don't think this was ^{another} ~~some kind of~~ immaculate conception . . ." I know, and this is the worst part, that she tried to talk him out of it. I suppose she acted with the same unawareness as when she tried to dissuade me from becoming a "common parish priest." At that point, Raül began coming to see me. He was looking for an ally against her. I must admit that his unshakeable decision to marry the girl--the daughter of some gypsies from Granada--made me love him. I encouraged him as much as I could to do what I thought was his duty, overriding my aunt and the whole universe if necessary.

When my aunt threw that fourteen-year-old girl out, I even took her into my rectory so she wouldn't have to return to the shack in Somorrostro that she shared with her parents, grandmother, and thirteen brothers and sisters. I also have to admit that I deluded myself about them, that if my aunt ^{imagined} ~~cooked up~~ trashy novels about knights and ladies, I ^{imagined} ~~cooked up~~ equally trashy ones about the proletariat. In reality, there

wasn't much to Raül. The marriage was a failure. The girl finally ran away with a guy who looked like a gypsy, worked in a grocery store, and had very black sideburns, leaving the baby with Raül, of course.

X
X
His place was taken in my aunt's heart by another nephew, a distant ^{one} nephew of whose existence I'd been entirely unaware. I'm not sure how she tracked him down. This one really did seem like a "genuine saint." "A genuine saint," my aunt said, "even if he did go to public school." He was a poor relative, not a relative who'd come down in the world, which is very different. He was the grandson of another first cousin, from another branch of the family that had nothing to do with the Valldemils, a cousin who'd made a bad marriage. She'd married a lowly bank employee who'd never managed to get promoted. As soon as my aunt had recruited him for her projects, this pearl of a nephew started writing a massive monograph about the ~~noble~~ ^{virtues} of that Marquise of Valldemil, Raül's grandmother and my aunt's aunt, who it seems was a kind of turn-of-the-century-style Llúcia. This exemplary young man didn't neglect to illustrate his voluminous study with a complete family tree, making it clear that the "saintly marquise" was my aunt's grandmother's older sister. There was no doubt that this young, pious, and scholarly nephew would come into the considerable wad that despite the falling pesseta and frozen rents, my aunt would leave in her will.

#

And because of my aunt, I began to detest that industrial town. I saw myself in her as in a mirror: my hunger for action, wasn't it merely a reflection of hers, a family tic? I began to suspect that I was a hysterical type of no use to anybody, that I lacked the necessary grace. I saw my own gracelessness in my aunt's and in our ineffectualness. Because good works without faith are as dead as faith without good works. Works

X
demand faith; that is, grace that can only come from God, because all grace is Grace just as all love is Love and all glory is Glory and nothing outside of God can be grace, love, or glory, and whoever has Grace acts with grace, but my aunt and I tend unconsciously to preach our own religion to others, and if it's ours it must be false, for the only true religion is God's and belongs to everyone. "Love thy neighbor," that is, whoever is near you, seated next to you by chance on the bus or subway, serving with you by chance in the same battalion or brigade. Christ never said, "Improve thy neighbor and mold him into what thou thinkest he should be" but "love thy neighbor"--love him as he is.

X
But what if you can't love ~~him~~ ^{your neighbor} as he is? Then run away, seek solitude. Live without neighbors. Either love ~~him~~ or avoid him. If your neighbor gets on your nerves, if you're incapable of love, if you're impotent, go hide your impotence and shame in solitude. God will take pity on you if you confess your impotence.

X
How forgiving He can be toward ~~cowards and the~~ ^{the cowardly and} impotent, if they confess their cowardice and impotence. I've taken refuge here in the mountains because that's what I am: an impotent coward. I have to seek God far from men ~~since~~ ^I I lack the courage to seek Him among them because what I've seen of men is horrible. From 1917, the year I was born, what an endless nightmare, what an ocean of blood, wars, and revolutions, "jours de gloire" giddily proclaimed but always followed by monotonous butchery, always butchery and nothing more than butchery.

X
Year after year of butchery, what monotonous butchery from Algarve to Kamchatka. They hid it from us; Europe was shrouded in silence from 1939 on. We lived for years and years beneath a thick sheet of ice.

Occasionally a rumor arose, like an almost imperceptible breeze that barely ~~ripples~~ ^{stirs} the grass and leaves no trail behind it. One never was sure

2X whether one had felt it or dreamed it! And the vast majority acted as though they knew nothing while Hitler and Stalin reigned and little Hitlers and Stalins ~~blessed~~ ^{sprouted} everywhere . . . the vast majority . . . ~~My~~ ^{My} aunt Llúcia looked at me as though I were crazy. "Come come," she said, "how can that be possible? It'd be in the newspapers . . ." And she would add sneeringly, "You've always been a sleepwalker . . ." The gas chambers were going full tilt; crematoriums belched columns of smoke, like temples of the new religion; death camps proliferated, giving us a glimpse of what those "men of the future" would be like. And they went on shooting and hanging, hanging and shooting, while the vast majority lived as though in utter ignorance, frivolous and carefree as though all that had nothing to do with them. Whatever happened, people wanted to live! Perhaps people are like nature, indifferent to catastrophes. Perhaps it has to be that way, nature has to be indifferent and unconcerned so it can ~~sprout~~ ^{blossom} again after each flood or earthquake. Perhaps the multitudes' frivolity is necessary ~~to~~ ^{for} the world's survival in eras like ours.

That's all there is to it; don't look for anything else.

X And one drifts like a ghost among those starving, frivolous multitudes who worship the Molochs of the moment: Hitler, Stalin, or their small-time imitators, and one can do nothing but ~~curl up~~ ^{cower} in one's lair like a trapped beast if one refuses to participate in the ~~incomprehensible~~ ^{sensless} spectacle. One clings to the bitter comfort of being among the defeated, of having nothing in common with this world's victors--especially nothing in common with the species, perhaps even worse, of those who lick their boots. My only consolation after thirty years, a wasted life, is ~~to be~~ ^{that I'm} among the defeated.

X Now I've prepared everything for my death, when the time comes, in a ~~nursing~~ ^{home} home for penniless old priests. I've arranged to donate my eyes

for cornea transplants. Lord, I forgot I still had eyes. I thought I had nothing left in this world. I'm truly my aunt's nephew! Two ugly, myopic eyes. I felt embarrassed to offer them to Doctor B. He told me myopic eyes can also be useful. Be useful to someone; be good for something. Maybe someone will regain his sight thanks to my ugly eyes. That's a comforting thought. My sojourn on earth won't have been entirely in vain.

Because in truth, my life has been more useless than my aunt's. I'm a much more unworthy priest than she imagined. She's unaware and always will be of the saddest episode in my life.

I spent two weeks in hell. Like a sleepwalker. Like what I am.

When the ^{arch}bishop forbade me to preach in Catalan, I disobeyed him.

Then he suspended me from the priesthood. I couldn't say Mass until further notice. I wasn't even allowed to wear a cassock. My aunt knew all this; for her it was a stain on the ~~family~~ ^{family's} honor. To others it was a martyr's halo. They were mistaken. I was no martyr. I reacted vilely.

I lost my faith.

#

At the end of the war, or more exactly when they let me out of the Spanish concentration camp, she scrupulously handed over my inheritance from my parents (I'd turned twenty-one toward the end of the war), which at that time was still a considerable sum. In 1949 I still had it. My suspension in no way affected my economic situation, because I was rich.

I lost my faith. One day I woke up and it was gone. I didn't have it anymore, the faith that had never forsaken me and in which I'd never wavered. I woke up without my faith as someone might wake up without his wallet, stolen by a thief in the night.

But I had my wallet, which was very fat at the time, bursting with bills. I'd fallen asleep praying the night before, and when I woke up I no

longer had my faith. I felt nothing but a void, a numbness inside me. I'd fallen asleep praying, as I usually did, and when I woke up my faith was gone. I'd lost it in my sleep. Which of my dreams had made me lose it? I couldn't recall the dreadful dream during which the amputation had taken place!

Because it was truly as though someone had amputated something. I looked at myself in the mirror and grimaced in disgust at the unrecognizable image I saw there.

X "Now you can finally see yourself as you are," I said to that unrecognizable image. Everything seemed like a huge joke, an endless carnival, ~~an~~ obscene chaos, from microscopic viruses to the most distant galaxies. "So many galaxies," I thought, "so many galaxies, and for what? Billions of galaxies, all the same, at equal intervals throughout boundless space: what monotony, what a lack of imagination! And I made faces at myself in the mirror because at that moment I was thinking of all those galaxies that seemed so idiotic in their monotony and also about the new bishops, and I thought, "Maybe they're on the right track. Why shouldn't the Church be like everything else, a good deal for operators and a torment for suckers? Jesus was a sucker and Caiaphas was an operator: that's the Bible in a nutshell! And moreover, centuries later Caiaphas, precisely because he's an operator, has exclusive rights to represent poor Jesus." My cassock was hanging at the foot of the bed. The sight of it made me sick. And I winked roguishly at myself, at the image I saw reflected. "They stole my faith, but they left my wallet." And I found myself uglier than ever.

That night I began my sleepwalking pilgrimage.

I didn't have much idea of where I wanted to go or what I planned to do. Something was following me like my shadow. No, no; it wasn't

shame. It was something much worse. I hugged the buildings, seeking out the darkest, narrowest, most winding alleyways. I abandoned myself to chance, since I didn't know what I was looking for. I sensed that other thing behind me; I could feel its cold breath on my neck.

X It was the first time I'd seen ^{the red-light district} it. Touched by night's finger, ~~the red-~~
X ~~light district~~ opened magically before me like an overripe melon worms had

riddled with tunnels. Through the early-December fog, how many dives shone like eyes, bargain-rate hells whose blasts of stale air hit me in the face as when one ~~enters the door to~~ ^{opens a window in} a bedroom that's never aired!

X Everything about that nocturnal vision astonished me. The most lugubrious joints were illumined by dark purple lights, and far-off, amid the mists, the phosphorescent eyes of a night-stalking panther seemed to watch me.

X The strident orchestras added to the illusion of an ambiguous Amazon, but the air was chilly and the night ^{was} damp in that neighborhood down by the sea. From time to time it drizzled, and an occasional downpour soaked the

2X streets, which gave off a ~~small of drenched~~ ^{another wet} dog. For the first time in my life, I observed the cautious comings and goings of those mature or even old men, so sad they made me feel like crying, the shame in their faces and those shameless women. My shocked eyes discovered long lines of emaciated women, half naked despite the bitter cold. Those shadowy violet lights outlined them eerily without dispelling the darkness. I ended up

X feeling as though I could see in the dark like a panther, and as I passed them I sniffed their heavy, warm perfumes--cheap, to be sure!--and those orchestras' strident laughter sent chills ^{down} ~~up~~ my spine like the sound of a fingernail scratching a pane of glass.

X Some of them clustered around the doors to cabarets; these were the noisy ones. They smoked and chattered away, and I got ^{confused} ~~lost~~ trying to imagine what each one's life was like. Perhaps, I thought, they're like the

galaxies, billions of galaxies scattered throughout the universe at equal intervals without rhyme or reason. Deep down everything is the same: billions of identical things, galaxies or prostitutes, scattered at equal intervals in space that's nothing but an endless vacuum--what a vacuum, what stupidity!--and time, another equally stupid vacuum that never, never ends! ^{Space time} ~~Time and space~~ without rhyme or reason. But others stood by themselves, stationed in black doorways, and those solitary prostitutes seemed older than the others, taller and gaunter than the others, colder too. They pulled their shawls tightly around them and stood motionless in those doorways, and I saw one who was taller and skinnier than the rest, more solitary than the rest, far from the others, not in a doorway but on a street corner. At first I hadn't noticed her; there were so many of them, all the same, like big wingless birds, ^{feverish} big sick birds whose ~~feverish~~ eyes couldn't stand the daylight. I didn't notice her till I'd passed by many times without her moving or looking at me. She didn't see me. She was stationed there like a sentinel. Her two eyes stared unblinking into the darkness, looking at nothing. Their emptiness and fixedness made them look bigger and oddly beautiful. Since she was standing there on the corner at an acute angle formed by two streets, facing into the damp, gusty wind that blew from the port, her thin, worn clothes clung to her body and at times she looked like one of those wooden statues on the bows of old frigates. You would have said she was stationed there like a sentinel from an army that, though defeated, had never ^{surrendered} ~~given up~~. She did her grim duty, facing the night, the rainy wind, and fate: that sordid old companion.

And I felt a great desire to fall into an endless abyss as sometimes happens in dreams, to fall and fall endlessly into a multicolored abyss, and still I felt that cold breath on my neck and an inner voice tyrannically

X ordered me to do what I'd ^{come there} ~~run away~~ to do. I had to follow through to the end, and I did it like a tedious chore, like an onerous duty, always with that cold breath on my neck.

That wretched whore's jeers made my disgust complete. "You mean it's really your first time? But you're a big boy!" I was over thirty; and despite everything I lived with her for two weeks. Yes, I wanted to live with her, much to her amazement. The first two days, her pimp was discreet enough to ~~keep~~ ^{stay} away. The third day he showed up, astonished that I still hadn't cleared out. And I, overwhelmed by revulsion and sadness, told him he could stay with us, that I really didn't care. Nothing mattered to me anymore. "The more the merrier!" I said, when actually I felt like crying. I gave him money too, and it was shocking how much money they could waste on the most incredible junk, but I gave them whatever they asked for. That man, who was no longer young--one could see he was well over forty--very dark and with very black sideburns, didn't spare me his mocking glances, nor did she. In his eyes I must have been a fool and, what's worse, a fool of an unknown and unfathomable sort. She had nothing in common with the mute statue I'd glimpsed on a street corner; her chatter gave me a splitting headache. It dazed me. I'd have given anything to be far away, but I had to live with her because that cold breath tingled on my neck whenever I wavered. I was being watched. I was trapped! The invisible was right behind me, breathing down my neck to remind me that it was there, that it saw me, that it could read my mind. I had to obey it, to carry out that unpleasant ^{task} ~~chore~~ to the bitter end.

X And she fed me stories about movie stars; she was a gold mine of information. She knew them all, male and female, every detail of their divorces and marriages, and she couldn't believe my ^{ignorance} ~~ignorance~~ when I

confessed that I didn't even know their names! This started right on the first day. From the third day on, I also had to put up with her pimp and dog. Yes, the pimp had returned with their dog, of whom more later. There was only one room for the four of us--her, the pimp, the dog, and myself--a single room with only one small window that looked out on an airshaft dark and narrow as a well. That well brimmed over with inconceivable stench and songs vomited by radios ~~going~~ ^{tuned up} full blast and ~~the~~ ^I sounds of flushing toilets near and far, as on calm evenings in the country when one hears angelus bells from all the unseen villages and hamlets around. These were our angelus bells: toilets near and far. She lavished the most touching attentions on her dog. It's as though I could see her now, sitting on the edge of the sagging divan that also served as our bed, holding the dog in her lap while she hunted for fleas with saintly patience and squashed them one by one between her thumb and ~~her~~ ^I index finger; as though I could hear of the crunch of each squashed flea . . . and the day her pet came in from the street with a big tick. What a melodrama, what excitement till a neighbor showed her how ~~to deal with~~ ^I ticks, ~~how~~ ^{tick} a drop of oil on the ~~parasite~~ ^{tick} would make it easy to pluck out.

She and the pimp were always gabbing away as though I weren't there, just as they would have chatted in front of the dog, so incapable was I of taking part in those disjointed conversations I found so incomprehensible. I huddled in my corner, listening to the sound of their voices, dumbfounded. One evening, to my surprise, they happened to talk about God. That day she'd visited the church in the Plaça del Pi ~~to light~~ ^{and lit} a candle to Saint Pancras, to whom she was very devoted, and he made fun of her. He made fun of that saint the pious ~~prayed~~ ^I to for health and work. Angry, she told him to mind his own business since lighting candles to Saint Pancras didn't hurt anybody, "and if you don't believe in Saint

Pancras or in God, tell me who made the world, people, dogs, and everything else!"

"Of course I know," he replied without the slightest hesitation. "It was Christopher Columbus, the one with the statue at the bottom of the Rambla. And then they killed him, which is what always happens."

One evening this philosophical pimp showed up with a girl who had no place to sleep, or at least that was his explanation. There was a dreadful scene. He pointed out that she'd brought me home and he'd put up with me. She insisted that I "was different" because I was a "gentleman" who gave money to both of them, to him as well as her. He started bellowing that he was the man, he wore the pants in that apartment, and all this was laced with most fabulous obscenities on both sides while ~~that~~ ^{the} newcomer cowered in a corner, waiting for the storm to pass. And in fact, she spent the night with the pimp on the floor, while the mistress of the house, I, and the dog occupied the divan. A couple of days later, the girl told us she'd found a room to stay in, and then it was the pimp who decided to move out with her.

And so we found ourselves alone again for a few days, and on the morning of one of those days I had a bizarre experience. She'd gone out with her dog to shop for groceries, and I was alone in the room.

I was alone, sitting on the divan, all alone, without even the dog, which she always took with her when she went shopping. Suddenly I felt that I was not only alone in that room but in the entire universe. I'd become terribly alienated from everything: from that divan, from that room imprisoning me within its four grimy walls, from that little window looking out on its well as it might have looked out on the absolute emptiness and cold of intergalactic space/time, on the whole absurd universe! I myself was a frozen vacuum. Within me, there was nothing but absolute emptiness,

absolute cold, absolute darkness. I existed, since I continued to experience myself as existing, but I no longer was. I was no one; I was empty. I felt like a mummy. I looked at myself from the outside, as though I'd become external to myself.

It was unbearable.

X I sat there, nailed to that divan. My eyes, wide open, stared at a point on the wall, the hole left by a tack that had disappeared God knows when, and that black hole was everything! I felt as though I were frozen in that position, my gaze fixed on that black spot, and could stay that way for all eternity. I was an object: an unusual and senseless object that would remain forever in that room, sitting on that divan, immobile, my eyes fixed on the tiny orifice an old tack had ~~once~~ ² left. "And in those days shall men seek death, and shall not find it." I'd have liked to have the strength to get up and grab the knife I saw on the table and cut my arm so I could feel something that would bring me back to myself.

Impossible. I was frozen.

She found me in that position. She called me and I heard her, but I couldn't answer. I was there, but I was far away. I heard her as a dead man hears the living gathered around his coffin.

She shook me but I didn't move. Alarmed, she went to fetch her pimp from the other woman's room. The two of them shook me, and I heard her telling him, "If he dies we'll be in big trouble." And I thought how wonderful it would be to die if I could but I couldn't die because I couldn't do anything.

X Till I suddenly burst into tears. It came over me as swiftly as what had preceded it. I wept, and between sobs I moaned ~~softly~~ ² to myself, like soft howls--I could feel myself again--and I couldn't stop weeping and the two of them gaped at me in amazement and I heard her say, "He's crazy.

I always had a feeling he was." But I was deliriously happy sobbing and moaning and howling and that crying fit lasted a whole hour--they told me afterward. An hour of nonstop crying, without moving, without saying a word, my eyes fixed the whole time on that hole in the wall.

From that day on, they took advantage of me more than ever. They were constantly asking for money and more money and calmly, brazenly making fun of me to my face. The dog, who had slept at our feet on top of the quilt, now slept under the covers, between her and me. She made me go along with all kinds of whims because now she knew for sure: I was a ~~filthy~~ ^{fool} rich idiot.

Till one day, before the sun came up, I made my getaway after poisoning the dog, whose name was Bob. I gave him a poisoned meatball so he'd be too busy devouring it to bark. I'd carefully prepared it the night before. I'd taken a little meat out of the refrigerator. ^{She} ~~she~~ had bought a refrigerator with my money; just what she needed to fill that room with so much junk that no one could move in it). I'd carefully chopped it up like a master chef while the two of them were at the movie house on the corner. I'd mixed it with white powder, a fine white powder I'd bought that morning while she was out shopping for food. I had to do that, Bob's stomach had to burst once and for all and with it those two weeks of hell. The dead dog was the souvenir I planned to leave them.

I had to step over the pimp, who was snoring on the floor, and I put my shoes on once I was outside, oppressed by a feeling of mortal sin. What joy! I finally felt something again, even if it was only my own ~~impending~~ ^{fool} damnation! I wandered around the neighborhood, since I didn't know what was left for me to do, where to go or what to look for. But I was free. The invisible had stopped tailing me, I longer felt its cold breath on my neck. I wandered down narrow streets I didn't recognize, stopping

here and there to gaze idly in the windows of junkshops that sold the trashiest flotsam from squalid shipwrecks: umbrellas, parasols, Chinese vases, chamberpots, beat-up kitchen gadgets, enemas, rubber gloves, gray top hats, wind-up Victrolas, crystal radio sets. My eyes wandered from that jumble of objects to the cobblestones soaked in horse piss, those mossy red and green cobblestones, green where the sun never reached them, and here and there I saw one of those big squashed yellow splotches made by horse ^a ~~dung~~ ^{turn} a truck has run over, because there were still wagons in Barcelona back then, twenty years ago! I can see them now: those big horses drawing heavy wagons to and from the ^{wholesale market} ~~port~~. And the river of misery flowed ceaselessly by: old women in rags, some of them drunk; skeletal girls with goosebumps on their bare legs; bent workers with cigarette butts they'd picked out of the gutter in their toothless mouths. Who could describe the sadness of those butts sucked as one sucks on a last hope, the endless misery of those long years; the hunger, the misery and desperation of those years while the radio vomited triumphant speeches and there was one ceremony and victory parade after another? Who could ever describe all that? And I was a priest who'd hung up his cassock and who'd just lived for two weeks with a withered old whore and in my bitterness I'd have liked word of my fall to reach ^{2A} ~~my~~ aunt Llúcia, for her to know her darling nephew had come to that: an unfrocked priest living in concubinage, the most revolting odor her exquisite nose could ever smell! And I could see my aunt and the monsignor. Yes, I saw him with others of his sort--and these weren't in partibus infidelium, they were real bishops--on top of flatbed trucks bedecked with field guns like carnival floats . . . I still have magazines from that period. Perhaps without those yellowing photos I'd end up wondering if it wasn't a bad dream. They all gave the Nazi salute. And as I wandered aimlessly in a ^{depressed} ~~in a~~

~~state of mortal sin~~ I saw a poor woman, still young, sitting in a filthy old doorway. She huddled against the cold in a big woolen shawl that completely covered her, and huddled with her in that shawl was a baby she was nursing. Everything but one of the baby's eyes was covered, but that eye, that single eye, that infant's eye was thoughtful and clearsighted and sent shivers down my spine.

~~He~~ ^{at} looked at me, lucid and perspicacious, with such gentle resignation, with such benign reproach. And behind the mother and child stood an older man with graying hair: the baby's father or grandfather? Standing behind them in the doorway, he stretched out his hand to passersby, silently begging for charity. And suddenly I clasped that hand, thrust my wallet into it, and fled in terror because on a calendar in a grocery store window I'd seen the date after losing track of time during those two weeks.

It was December 25th.

#

And then I saw him.

He was walking in front of me; I couldn't see his face.

He walked with slow, steady steps, never looking ~~around~~ ^{back}, an old worker bowed beneath his eighty years. I could see his back, bent by age and weariness. His roped-soled sandals left footprints as in the snow, but there was no snow. Then I saw the sign at the corner: Arc del Teatre Street, and I began weeping softly.

But he'd vanished. Only his footprints remained. Following them, I found myself kneeling in the confessional at Saint ~~Madrona~~ ⁺'s Church.

#

I want to be with You, Lord: a sucker like millions of others who are, have been, or will be, because operators are with the Other, and the

X Other terrifies me. One must choose. There's no alternative: either You or Nothingness. Operators choose Nothingness, and I'd tried to choose it too. I'd sucked on it like a ~~stale~~ cigarette butt plucked from the gutter, but I want to be with You, like Doctor Gallifa. He who bent his back beneath the burden of atrocity, anonymous among the anonymous, lost among the lost, never uttering the atrocity's name. Because it's You who have called those broken by weariness, the countless army of this world's defeated. Lord, I want to be defeated, a failure, because those operators appall me.

X X In another era, at the beginning of each Mass we called You ~~you~~ the joy of our youth," words mysterious yet clear because strange as it may seem, this is what You want: for us to be forever young, even beneath the burden of eighty years. The spirit of poverty is nothing more than the spirit of youth, youth unconcerned about anything but ideals. The only path to eternal youth is total consecration to You. Otherwise, one must bend before this world's demands. Only one entirely consecrated to You can enter an old people's home, when the time comes, with the same alert, joyous curiosity with which he once entered a school, a dormitory, a university, an army: that joyous, carefree curiosity with which we marched off to war in 1936! Everything's an adventure, everything's joyous for the young. If only one could sink one's teeth into life's last loaf of bread as joyously as one ate the first!

X Let operators squabble over this world like dogs scrapping over a bone in a garbage ~~pile~~ ^{dump}. Let them kneel down and worship the Lie, which is their god. Let them chase after Nothingness and Vainglory: Vainglory, which is no less grotesque for being bloodthirsty.

How many times, throughout the centuries, have we felt that our "jour de gloire" was nigh, that it had arrived, and yet it has always turned into a vicious massacre. I should hate war, since I know it, yet despite

everything I still dreamed back in those days that I was again with Lluís, with Soleràs, with all of them! In my dreams we advanced among the reeds along a big river followed by a huge army bristling with artillery, preceded by a swarm of tanks and protected by another swarm of planes. We advanced and advanced along the banks of a broad river that perhaps was our million dead . . . And in those dreams, I wasn't an inoffensive paramedic but an artillery captain leading my company against ^{the} enemy ^o ~~trenches~~. My dreams were sinful. They were murderous. As always! Because war is atrocious and yet my heart bursting with bitterness could dream of nothing else.

There's only one ^{way} ~~path~~ to avoid betraying one's youth, other than dying young. It's a narrow path, so narrow one can't walk down it arm ⁱⁿ ~~and~~ arm with a woman. One has to follow it by oneself.

Arm in arm with a woman, as I'd dreamed in a moment of madness . . . that would be too lovely! The path is narrow; one must walk it alone.

#

Trini . . . And it's only fitting and proper! A mother's dreams must be full of ^{big wardrobes} ~~deep closets~~ whose warm darkness hides all manner of good things for her children: soft blankets, fresh sheets, clothes pleasing to the touch. My dreams, mine, my dreams in those days were worse than sinful. They were stupid. She does her duty, she devotes herself to her children and her ^{wardrobes} ~~closets~~, to her comfortable house, a house as cozy as a grandmother, and all that . . . all that costs money. A mother must fear poverty. The spirit of poverty, of eternal youth, of unconcern is only possible for a celibate.

If someone, on this world's pathways, finds a family both indigent and happy--and they exist, for this world is as broad and varied as it is dark and ^{senseless} ~~incomprehensible~~--let him know that this has a name, the

heavenly name of Nazareth.

X But I'm nothing more than a failure. If only I could be one in full
X awareness, humbly and honestly, accepting my failure in its entirety!
Because happy is the man who is a failure and accepts it without rancor;
acceptance of one's failure is the only possible success. And how ugly
success's face can be, how many successes I've seen bursting with self-
satisfaction! How many corpses I've seen removed from their niches--a
parish priest in an industrial town has to preside at so many burials--and
with what indifference gravediggers take out one and shove in another. So
many people die every day in a city like Barcelona! They wouldn't fit if
we left the old corpses where they were. A million deaths every twenty
years. The city of the dead grows faster than the city of the living,
because the dead don't die. And they throw the old bones in a common
pit, a huge pit where sooner or later all successes wind up whether or not
they've had fancy funerals with a hundred precentors. We, the living, are
only a handful compared with the millions and millions who have died
since the world began. It's as though we were sitting on a mountain of
bones! The dead would have buried everything long ago if they didn't
fortunately turn into impalpable dust! This world's successes, its victors,
the self-satisfied can have their hordes of slaves construct astounding
pyramids, imposing Escorials, fabulous valleys of the dead. Nothing can
stop Cheops, Chephren, and Mikerinos from someday turning into dust and
nothing more: pulvis es et in pulverem reverteris. That's why they're so
obsessed with success, victory, triumph. They're in a hurry to gorge
themselves on them before they end up in ~~the Himalaya~~ ^{that Mount Everest} of bones that have
been piling up since the world began!

X But my God, even this vision imagined by a hopeless neurasthenic,
these Himalayas of bleached bones at the bottom of human history, can

never come into my mind without fanning my hottest, most sinful desires .

..

I see her hair, such a delicate shade of red, fluttering like a flag in the cold wind of a winter morning in the Aragonese mountains; her green eyes . . . She, I, and Ramonet were standing beneath a cliff that stood out dark against the snow, a cliff so steep the snow couldn't cover it and that seemed strangely naked in that universe clothed in soft whiteness. The sun was glorious, the cold stinging. We could hear but not see--they were flying too high--enemy planes on their way to Teruel. Sometimes we could catch their glitter, like specks of dust in a ray of sunlight. And how far away that battle seemed from our peaceful nook, Santa Espina! We lived on our quiet front like sluggish frogs beneath a pile of leaves. Three months of inactivity had made us forget that after all we were at war and our turn ^{would} ~~could~~ come ~~around~~ ^{again} when we least expected it.

That morning we'd gone out because the sun was radiant and because I found it hard to believe what she'd told me ⁱⁿ in one of our long chats on those benches by the fire ^{about} about calcareous cliffs: that the layers of rock, sometimes hundreds of yards deep, that form so many of our mountains ^{are} ~~are~~ ^{come from} ~~made of~~ the shells of tiny creatures piling up at the bottoms of seas during millions of centuries. ^{Up} ~~Until~~ until then, I'd never taken an interest in geology and knew nothing about it. Now I realize that everyone knows how calcareous rocks are formed, but at the time I found it incredible. She'd brought a little hammer with which she chipped off bits of rock that she had me examine beneath a magnifying glass. I saw all kinds of shells, invisible to the naked eye, like snails or mollusks or God knows what microscopic creatures. "Practically the whole cliff's made of them," she said, and as the two of us peered through her magnifying glass I breathed in the perfume of her hair brushing against my cheek. I was amazed to

discover that those rocks, apparently so solid beneath our feet, were nothing more than the dust left by myriads of lives. Il triomfo della Morte, I thought, but beneath that oddly dark, bare cliff, her perfume was the triumph of life. Her thick woolen sweater outlined her graceful body, the wind made her hair flutter like a flag, and her green eyes, half teasing and half melancholy, troubled me as nothing else in this desolate world has ever troubled me.

How many years have passed since then? My God, a good thirty! I've also turned fifty with nothing to show for it. There comes a moment when all of us, ^{fools} ~~idiots~~ that we are, reach life's crest and suddenly realize that we're no longer who we were before, that we're others. Our youth has fled! Who would dare to stubbornly go on claiming to be young once he's reached the peak of fifty, when the path turns downward? Yet despite everything . . . Despite everything, when I see her again in dreams or memories, my heart pounds as furiously as it did then! Then, when its pounding struck me dumb and almost took my breath away, while my hands trembled and I felt my face burn . . . then, when I wanted to shout, "He was Doctor Gallifa!" but my voice wouldn't obey me, as in oppressive dreams when we want to cry out and an invisible hand ^{clamps} ~~closes~~ our mouths. He was Doctor Gallifa! That octogenarian Jesuit whom she'd known and who had so impressed her, but how could I say so? How could I tell her I'd read her letters ^{on the sly} ~~in secret~~? And now the case for his beatification, dormant ^{for} ~~for~~ so many years, has been reopened on account of a new miracle and I'll have to go and testify again. But I won't talk about what I saw that Christmas morning. I won't tell how he appeared to silently guide me across the Parallel to the confessional in Saint Madrona's Church. I'll keep that ^{to} ~~all~~ to myself. It's no one's business but my own. Why should anyone care about my life?

III

Que l'échec soit lié à la
structure du moi, cela ne
signifierait-il pas que l'homme
ne se suffit pas ~~à lui-même~~ *et qu'il doit être*
~~qu'il doit être~~ *achevé par un*
autre?

Jean Lacroix, L'échec

At least I hope they're not ~~at~~ *right*, Lluís and Trini and the rest.
Yes, Lluís and Trini. I heard them talking about me the same way as those
priests at the archbishop's palace. "I'm afraid he's turned into a hopeless
neurotic," Lluís said. I heard him perfectly. I was about to open the door
to his suite at a fancy hotel, but when I heard their voices I stopped . . .
Yes, I stopped and listened behind the door as I'd done in Santa Espina.
"It's a miracle," Trini replied, "that all those poor priests aren't half crazy
..."

The same words I'd overheard a few days earlier at the archbishop's
palace! I was in His Grace's waiting room. He'd summoned me to explain
certain irregularities. It seems one of my parishoners had complained about
me, I don't know which but naturally I suspect the most sanctimonious old
biddy in my congregation. As I passed the offices on the ground floor, I
thought I heard someone mention my name behind a closed door. I stopped
to listen. "Neurotic?" one of them said. "All those priests in mountain
villages are half crazy." "Did you know," the other asked, "that this poor
Father Cruells fought with the Reds in the war, a volunteer from the first
day to the last? What a case!"

They were two priests who worked in the offices. I recognized their
voices, and I thought that it was like the war, always like the war. There
are always two worlds: lousy bastards in the trenches and those with
cushy jobs in the rear. You can bet your life that pair had never been

priests in mountain villages! Their voices had the unctuous, pitying tone we men of the cloth know so well how to adopt, but I could tell they were thanking God they hadn't ended up like me. From that day on I loved our archbishop even more, so stupid but so good, so misunderstood in Barcelona at that time. He was one of us; he'd been in the trenches! The only difference was that he'd been in the trenches on the other side. Perhaps someday it'll be understood that in all wars, those eaten by lice in trenches all belong to the same race . . .

But my God, what if it's true that I've turned into a hopeless neurotic? "Poor Catalan priests," Trini said. "It's a miracle they haven't all ended up that way." I heard her. I was listening behind the door, as in Santa Espina, as always!

Neurotic . . . why not? Why shouldn't I have turned into a neurotic? Who would have stopped me from becoming one? In any case, I'm at peace with myself. I've arranged everything so I can enter that home for old, penniless priests when my time comes if indeed I ever grow old. I've arranged everything so that my sole possession of any value, my eyes, my nearsighted eyes, will be of use to another when I no longer need them. Lord, inconceivable things happen, things that could happen anywhere, for murderers rule the universe, but here there's silence. You've given us mouths to speak and eyes to see and ears to hear, but they steal our mouths, eyes, and ears; they won't let us speak, see, or hear. How could I not be a neurotic, my God, who would stop me? Neurotic? I could be much more neurotic than I am! Yes, much more than those two priests in the archbishop's palace think. Back then, those with cushy desk jobs in the rear also thought those devoured by lice in the trenches were a bunch of neurotics. If I were as neurotic as they say, I wouldn't love Lluís. I'd hate him! Yet every time he comes to Barcelona we embrace and my eyes

X inevitably fill with tears. I've never felt anything but joy every time I've seen them. And the hours I spend with him and Trini fly by so quickly and are so happy, the happiest I've spent in years ~~and years~~ I. Since the war, O Lord!

Lluís, tanner than ever and graying around the temples like a fifty-year-old sportsman, is still tall, of course, but now he's also stout, with the beginnings of a receding hairline. Each time he hugs me, he pats me on the back with the protective air of a successful businessman. The first time they visited Barcelona for a few days, in 1958, he sent me a telegram and I hastened to meet him at his ritzy hotel. I'd never set foot in one of those hotels, and it's a good thing I had the telegram with me. Otherwise they wouldn't have let me in. At the entrance stands a character who looks like he's wearing an admiral's or field marshal's costume from an operetta, with an extravagant top hat--what a top hat!--red and gold like his livery and the big umbrella he holds. Despite my astonishment, I gathered during his stern cross-examination that he'd been stationed there to bark at you if he senses that you don't belong to the race of his gods and to bow deeply if you do. If you do and a couple of drops of rain fall ~~at that moment~~ 5, he even shields you with his immense umbrella as though you were His Holiness and he were leading you along beneath a canopy.

X My country priest's clodhoppers sank into that plush carpet as into warm, red snow. I couldn't help thinking of that refugee camp, where they sank into a quagmire of shit. It was at the foot of the Pyrenees, in France. In the indescribable chaos of our defeated army crossing the border, it seems that some peasant mules, females, had mingled with the males used by the army. All this came back to me as I tromped like a fool across that carpet, so deep, red, and luxurious. I glanced around me at vast lounges full of elegant women entombed in the depths of easy chairs

X too big for them, women who were very ~~long~~^{tall} and slender and smoked, crossing their legs and looking bored to tears. How bored they looked, how miserable, and how long their legs were! And the soldiers, brutalized by boredom and the filth of that refugee camp, gathered around them for amusement, since they had no other. Among those bored, smoking women were a few men of the species one normally sees in ritzy hotels, the type who always look forty-five years old, always exactly forty-five, and who always seem to be worrying about extremely weighty and complex business deals. The soldiers shouted as one shouts at a soccer game or prizefight, urging the mules on in that vile spectacle till Picó, redder with indignation than I'd ever seen him before, exploded, "It's shameful enough that we let the fascists whip us! Let's at least ~~prove~~^{show} we have some manners!" That's what I remembered as I tromped sheepishly through those lounges and they stared at me, those eternally forty-five-year-old men and those women bored stiff, staring at me in astonishment as I walked among them. And in truth my greenish cassock, worn shiny at the knees and elbows, must have made quite an impression! I can imagine the impression because another day when I also stopped to listen to Lluís and Trini behind the door after saying goodbye to them, he said "Poor Cruells has taken on the color of poverty."

I'd have gotten lost on the upper floor if the manager of that hotel in person, knowing I was Lluís's friend, hadn't led me down those hallways. How long and wide those hallways were, how shiny their parquetry, how thick and red their runners. I felt that my country priest's clodhoppers were leaving footprints of refugee-camp shit behind me, what an ocean of shit from Algarve to Kamchatka! What a vast ocean, what a mare tenebrosum! As I walked by, I glimpsed a bathroom whose door was open. It was absurdly sumptuous. It looked like a royal throne room with

the toilet in the middle as the throne. There were even some ~~aquariums~~ ^{fish tanks} built into the the black marble walls, and exotic tropical fish flashed in the shadows. It was all as profound and mysterious as a crypt used by some secret religious cult whose altar was the toilet, and I felt sadder and sadder because luxury is as sad as poverty or more so. Poverty . . . bah, what do I care? If I weren't so neurotic . . . And I remembered the ex-chef from a fancy hotel who used to confess to me, back when I was in that industrial town, and once he told me that when he'd been a chef he used to clear his throat and spit into the bisque de langoustes before passing it on to ~~the chef~~ ^{the maître d'hôtel} who would then serve it to the gods of this world. It was during those years, when everyone was starving. One day the ~~chef~~ ^{maître d'hôtel} caught him and fired him on the spot.

#

Yes, I love Lluís. I feel happy with him when he comes to Barcelona—he's come more and more often ~~since then~~—but it's on account of the Lluís I knew during the war, so vivid in my memory, because this other . . . this other Lluís disconcerts me like someone whose inner life one once knew and who now doesn't have one, who has no inner life for himself or anyone else. Ever since they let them come, quite a few ~~of them~~ ^{of them} have ventured back to Barcelona for a few weeks. They all seem ashamed of having been defeated, the only thing the world was able to offer God! As though seeking to hide their failure beneath their success, they come to dazzle us, tossing around fistfuls of dollars. How naive the poor devils are.

His brother died two or three years after the war: Ramon, who once had so much influence on him. I never actually met him, though we occasionally corresponded between my release from prison camp and his death. But once he'd died, I started going and still go from time to time to visit that home for the mentally retarded where he'd lived surrounded

by barely human beings. Three of them are still alive. If anyone mentions "Brother Ramon" in front of them, they utter guttural, inarticulate cries. One of them, upset, grunts and growls noisily while drool trickles from his lips. As good a way of weeping as any other . . .

He died in 1942 of anthrax of the nasal cavities, which inspired one of my aunt Llúcia's classic phrases, "Anthrax! And you claimed he was a saint!"

And . . . Trini?

Trini, who was no beauty at twenty, is one at fifty.

I hadn't seen him since those meetings at the archbishop's palace to promote Doctor Gallifa's beatification. He'd again given me the address of his "garçonnière" and urged me to visit him, but it upset me too much to see him. Then there'd been my conflicts with the archbishop, my suspension a divinis, my fall, my repentance, my two-year stay in the Caribbean: things that would take a long time to recount and that perhaps I'll never write about. They ~~had~~ sent me there as a kind of penance. Once I'd returned, I no longer wanted to work in an industrial town. I'd asked to be transferred to a rural parish and, among those vacant, had chosen the one farthest up in the Pyrenees.

I came down to Barcelona from time to time because the archbishop often summoned me. There was only one bus to Barcelona early in the morning and another in the evening going back, so I had to spend most of the day in the city. That's how I happened to be there on that day. Was it 1952, 1953, 1954 perhaps? The years have blurred in my memory, and what difference does it make since they were all the same in that dark tunnel? But something incredible happened that day, something that even now, some twenty years later, is a mystery. No one knows how it could have been organized, if indeed someone did organize it: a general strike in Barcelona. I knew nothing about it. As I've said, I happened to be in town for other reasons. Suddenly I realized that the streetcars were empty, the stores were shuttered, and that crowds of those who should have been in factories, workshops, and offices filled the downtown streets. They walked along in silence; all I could hear was the tromping of thousands of shoes. How silent a crowd can be! There were no shouts or banners; they weren't needed. I walked up and down Pelayo Street, lost in ~~the~~ ^{the} crowd, hearing

X the tramping of ~~their~~^{its} shoes on the worn sidewalk, interrupted from time to time by the clatter of one of those streetcars the police kept running. I walked up and down, fascinated by the spectacle, so unusual at the time: a big city shut down by a strike, when all of a sudden, among thousands of faces floating in that silent river, I spotted one I recognized.

It was an old man's face; but oddly enough, it was also Lamonedá's.

I instinctively tried to slip away through the crowd. Just when I thought I'd lost him, I felt him clutching my arm.

"Anyone would think you're trying to run away from me," he muttered, "and yet we're old buddies. We have so much to talk about . . ."

His voice was plaintive.

X "In fact," he continued, "we're right near my ^Tgarçonnière.^T Don't you remember? It's on Tallers Street. Yes, the same one as before. Since I rented it before the war, it's dirt-cheap. I'm on duty right now, but that doesn't matter. They won't know the difference. Come on up; we can talk for a while. I've been trudging up and down this street for four hours straight."

J His ^Tgarçonnière,^T as he called it, was a kind of storage room atop an apartment building from the last century. To enter the elevator, he had to drop a coin in a slot in the brass doorknob, and the ancient machinery began rattling as we slowly and noisily ascended.

"You see, I've furnished it like an artist's studio, and not only that but in oriental style"--and he winked as he said "in oriental style," as though the very idea of the Orient were terribly risqué. We were in a not very large room with cushions strewn about the floor and a very low ottoman, not placed against the wall but right in the middle. Everything was shabby and dirty, but that oriental-style garçonnière's most notable

feature was its mirrors. There were big mirrors on all four walls and even on the ceiling. Wherever a patch of wallpaper showed, it was wet and mildewed. Everything seemed sodden with the damp that must have seeped ~~down from~~ ^{down through} the building's roof, which was directly above us, impregnated with countless years of damp and dirt. Everything was dirty, faded, cold, and gloomy, but he seemed unaware of it. He pointed to an incense burner beside the ottoman and winked at me again as though it were the most racily oriental object imaginable.

"The boss won't notice I'm gone," he said, carefully locking the door behind us. "One has to rest from time to time. I couldn't take it anymore. Four hours trudging up and down that street!"

He lit a stick of incense in my honor. It gave off an acrid, rather enervating smell, and I thought, "The ghost managed to lure me to his lair. Now how the devil am I going to get away . . ." He poured me a glass of Pernod from a bottle that stood open and half empty on a low table. As we drank he pointed out that he'd positioned those mirrors that had so attracted my attention "so ingeniously that when you're lying on the ottoman you can see yourself reflected on all four sides." Since the only window was shuttered, he'd switched on a light. The sound of people tramping along Tallers Street just as they had on Pelayo Street was barely audible. We were so cut off from the outside world that I felt a kind of anxiety, a burning need to at least open ~~that~~ ^{the} window.

"~~Why~~ ^{What} are you doing ~~that~~ ^{for}?" he asked. "It's nicer with everything shut and bolted, but if you prefer . . ."

Once it was open, I discovered that his room looked out on the dome of the church ~~by~~ ^{next to} the old army hospital ~~right~~ ^{of} across the street and on a sea of rooftops all the way down to the harbor. The sound of tramping feet now entered, along with the cool air from outdoors. As I gazed out

the window, he sat on the ottoman and said, "If you knew what fantastic orgies have been reflected in these mirrors . . . I've enjoyed life. I'm not a Jesuit like you! You see that carved Arabian chest on top of that trivet? That's where I keep a sensational collection of photos . . . I'll show them to you later. I keep them together with my manuscripts. I come here to write when I feel inspired. If publishers weren't a bunch of stupid old fogies, they'd have realized what a hit my complete works ^would be, especially if they were illustrated with ^{the} appropriate photos."

When I'd run into him in that café, he'd mentioned a notebook Soleràs had kept and had repeated it when we again met years later at the archbishop's palace. Though I was dying to see that notebook, my disgust at the mere idea of his "garçonnière" had been stronger, but now I found myself trapped there. Now, since I was already there . . .

"Yes," he replied, "that's what I told you. You have a good memory. I've got a ton of clippings in that chest, along with my photos and manuscripts! Clippings certain parties would ~~pay plenty~~ ^{pay plenty} ~~give their weight in gold for~~ . . . For example, I've got a complete collection of everything related to our illustrious Llibert Milmany! The only thing missing is the notebook you just mentioned. I don't have it for the simple reason that it never existed. And it never existed for the simple reason that Soleràs never wrote anything but an article for Mirador entitled "Youth in Rebellion." He told me about it himself one time. So you can see: everything he wrote would fit on four printed pages. My writings, on the other hand, my complete works would fill seven or eight thick volumes like those in the Espasa Encyclopedia."

"Then if that notebook doesn't exist," I asked, "why did you bring me here? I can see I'm wasting my time. I'm leaving."

"Don't be that way," he replied. "Soleràs's notebook does exist. I've

got it right here"--and he tapped his forehead.--"He didn't have to keep a notebook since I recorded everything he said. I've got a phenomenal memory; I never forget anything. In my line of work, memory is our most important tool. Laying aside false modesty, I can tell you there may not be another like mine in the whole universe. Himmler was astounded!"

It came back to him as the most glorious moment in his life, and he began griping about all the injustices the envious had made him suffer, how they'd plotted and schemed to trip him up and oust him from the important post he'd held for a while. Now they'd readmitted him, it was true, but at the lowest possible level.

"An underling, as you can see. And yet I was the one he singled out for his heartfelt congratulations. He understood, he was a genius! But our country doesn't appreciate talent. For example, I could repeat everything I overheard on Pelayo Street. I could repeat it a year from now or twenty years from now! But in our country . . . men of talent . . . dire poverty! So you see, it'd be easy for me to rattle off one of those tirades Soleràs ~~used to declaim~~ ^{declaimed} (because he did seem to be declaiming a lot of the time) on one occasion or another, but why do we always have to talk about Soleràs when he was nothing but a jerk? And besides, didn't you tell me you barely knew him? I'm amazed that you're always grilling me about someone so boring when there are so many ~~other~~ ^{I to talk about} interesting things ~~in the~~ [!] world! ~~My~~ ^I collection, for example, my photo collection. I can assure you--maybe I shouldn't say this, but laying false modesty aside--that it's unique in the world."

Needless to say--he showed them to me ~~then~~ ^I--they were nothing but pornography. They made me feel like throwing up. I pushed away that album crammed with hideous, ~~incomprehensible~~ ^{sensless}, appalling photos. He seemed disconcerted by my lack of interest in leafing through them.

"They're one-of-a-kind! Photography is another essential skill in my profession. I hate to say so, but I'm one of the top photographers in Europe. It's too bad all you want to talk about is Soleràs. I could tell you so many interesting stories . . . Once I made a big killing as a private eye. A millionaire hired me to take photos to prove his wife was unfaithful. If you knew the stunts I had to pull to get them! I gave him the negatives and told him I hadn't kept any copies. Of course I've got all the copies in this album. What? You want to hear about Soleràs? What a one-track mind! How come you knew him too? Yes, now I remember. You told me. You'd met his aunt on account of one of Saint Philomena's miracles. I already knew him back in 1930, when I was working in that drugstore on Sant Pau Street."

"You told me all that," I interrupted him.

"What else would you like to know? He was always ragging me and I had to put up with it. What else could I do? Once he started running off at the mouth about Jesuits. 'Do you remember, Lamonedà,' he said, 'how when you were a kid the Jesuits would always warn you about the temptations that according to them you'd have to overcome when you got older? And you, admit it, could hardly wait for those famous temptations to appear, not to fight against them . . .' 'Naturally,' I answered. 'Fight against them? What crap!' 'Naturally,' he said. 'It'd be a shame to fight against a temptation when you're lucky enough to run across one. But admit that those damned temptations haven't been as exciting as you'd imagined.' 'Everything in good time,' I replied. 'I'm still young,' because I hadn't turned fifty yet. 'Don't hold your breath,' he said. 'Poor Lamonedà: you still haven't caught on that the only temptations worth bothering about are precisely the ones we'll never see.'"

He filled our two glasses with Pernod again, and after taking a sip

he lay down on the ottoman. During the rest of our conversation, he remained in that position, gazing up at the mirror on the ceiling.

"'Poor Lamonedà,' Soleràs used to tell me, 'you're another Stendhal. My aunt, on the other hand, has nothing in common with Stendhal even though she was born in Grenoble. For example, if I'd told her Nati attracted me, she'd have replied, 'Well, then marry her.' 'Who is this Nati? The woman in the photo?' Because Soleràs kept a photo of a woman at the bottom of his suitcase. I told you about it, didn't I? 'Don't be a fool, Lamonedà,' he replied, acting annoyed. 'The one in the photo's quite the opposite, like me. I'm quite the opposite; always quite the opposite.' 'The opposite of what?' 'Of everything. Of Ibrahim, for example. I'm not fit to drink.' You can see what nonsense he'd talk."

His face, staring up at the ceiling, again became that old man's visage that had so startled me on Pelayo Street. How could it be that his face was sometimes Lamonedà's and sometimes that of an old man I'd never met? I remembered that when we'd bumped into each other in that café he'd said he'd "just turned fifty, with nothing to show for it." How many years had passed since then? Ten, eleven, twelve? He couldn't have been older than sixty or sixty-two, but caught between the electric light from the bulb, reflected in the mirror on the ceiling, and the twilight entering through the half open window, his face sometimes looked like that of a ninety-year-old.

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That mixture of faint glows--the naked bulb hanging from the ceiling and the twilight coming through the little window--lent an air of unreality to our conversation as he lay on the ottoman and I stared out the window as though the air inside would choke me. And as I tried to figure out how old Lamonedà might be, he startled me by whispering, "Are you wondering

how old I am?"

It was the first time he surprised me by guessing my thoughts as though he could read them in my eyes; and yet he wasn't even looking at me. He was staring at the ceiling.

"Are you wondering how old I am? Well, I'm over sixty. Why should I hide it? I'm not ashamed. Sixty years are nothing. Everything changes; that's progress. Nowadays, lots of people are sixty years old."

And then he delivered a piece of news that really shocked me: he was married. Yes, he'd been married for a little over a year. When he'd turned sixty--he told me--he'd decided the time had come to settle down.

X "I thought if I didn't make up my mind once and for all, some ^{dopes} jerks would start calling me an old bachelor. Yes, I was waiting to give you the big news: I'm married. You don't believe me? I know you don't. No one believes me. That's why I always carry my marriage license around with me."

Without getting up from the ottoman, he pulled a crumpled piece of paper out of the inside pocket in his jacket. It was in fact a civil marriage license (certifying that a religious wedding had already taken place) for Rodolf Lamonedà i Gallifa, sixty-one years of age, and Malvina Canals i Gonzàlez, thirty-four, both previously unmarried, both born and residing in Barcelona.

"Do you believe me now?" he growled, putting that piece of paper back in his pocket.

"Malvina Canals i Gonzàlez . . . I could swear, I don't know why but that name's familiar to me."

"It's the same woman," he said. "You know her. There's no other. The one who came in, sat down at the bar, and had a croissant and a cup of barley tea while you and I were chatting. Of course you remember. On the

Ronda de Sant Pau."

"The redhead?"

"The very same one. I brought her here to live, transformed into Mrs. Lamonedá. She should have been grateful, right? Nothing doing. She wasn't up to it. I'd had my hopes, but nothing doing. You should know that around then I was flush and could show her a good time. I'd struck gold. Malvina thought I was rich, and I was careful not to disillusion her. Why should I have disillusioned her before I had to? She'd be plenty disillusioned later on. That's what marriage is all about: disillusionments. You should have seen her, poor Malvina, so proud of having conned a rich old fart into marrying her; because she thought she'd conned me! And it made her so happy! She was so proud and happy! And it was easy for me to let her go on dreaming. Isn't it good to make women happy when it's so easy to do? One day I overheard a conversation between her and an old girlfriend from her days on the Ronda de Sant Pau. 'Yes, I married an old bachelor,' Malvina was saying, 'and don't think it was easy. He was slippery as an eel. He's loaded with dough. Listen Greta: (because the other one is called or claims to be called Greta), girls in our business meet know more poor young men than we know what to do with, but rich old farts are hard to bag. This was back at the beginning, you might say during our honeymoon. I'd given her to understand that we'd move, that this garçonnière was temporary until we found an apartment on the Passeig de Gràcia, or even better, a mansion on the Passeig de la Reina Elisenda. Why not? I promised her everything I could think of, and she ate it up. How could she not believe me when she saw me flashing those thousand-pesseta bills around? I even let her think I'd take her to the Liceu all dolled up in a fancy evening gown, and that, dressed in a tuxedo, I'd introduce her to Viscountess Rocaverd--you know she's a distant

X relative of mine, right? This bit about the vizcondesa--Malvina always says it in Castilian--drove her wild. It turns out that not long ago she saw a ~~Spanish~~ ^I movie about one. Imagine! Since when are we related? How could we not be when her father's and my mother's parents were second cousins? I must admit that the one time I tried to call on her, not only did she refuse to see me but she told the maid to warn me never to set foot in her house again. But I had a feeling that if my cousin--because that's what we are--saw me in a box in the Liceu dressed up in a tux with an elegant dame like Malvina in an evening gown . . . damned right. You bet your life: as elegant as they come! She'd have been a real knockout! You think the viscountess wouldn't have believed Malvina and I were married? 'Well, dear cousin,' I'd have replied, 'she's my lawful wedded wife.' And I'd have shoved this license under her nose. That's why I always carry it. Be prepared. Yes, I'd have shown it to my cousin and any other bigwig or his wife who doubted me so they could see that when I do something, I do it right. A civil wedding and a Catholic one! And since seeing is believing, I always carry that marriage license just in case, Malvina wouldn't have had to worry about anything but looking good, and those thousand-pesseta bills kept on flowing. ^{4.0} Well, instead of being grateful and rising to the occasion, you know what she did? Anytime I wasn't around, she brought her boyfriends to my garçonnière. As soon as I'd turn the corner, they'd be lined up outside the door! I couldn't always be here. I had work to do, lots of work. They didn't give me those thousand-pesseta bills for nothing! I decided to lock her in, and that put my mind at rest for a few weeks--till I found out one of her boyfriends was a locksmith. I couldn't be wasting time. I had too many important things to do. I was making good money, but I had to sweat and slave for it. I was a big wheel. I couldn't let a bunch of punks, just because one of

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them had a key (he was an altruistic locksmith and lent it to the others),
make a laughing stock of me. When a man's struggled to achieve a
respectable position in life, he has to make himself respected, by God! I
had to be in my office every day; it was no joking matter. I'll tell you
exactly what the story was, since it's old hat now. I'd found out that a
certain shoe manufacturer, who'd had a lot of trouble in the forties
keeping his little factory afloat, was now steaming full speed ahead and
had more dough than he knew what to do with. He even exported shoes to
the United States, imagine! Well, in his youth this man had attended a
Masonic lodge, and I knew it. I'd left him alone during the forties because
~~I knew he had his hands full just trying to survive.~~
All I'd have gotten was the satisfaction of sending him to jail. What? Just because he'd been a
Mason? That's what it was like at first. Don't you remember? It's true
that apparently he'd only been in a lodge for a few weeks, long before the
war, when he was seventeen or eighteen, but it was a fact that he'd
attended one and I had the papers to prove it. When I showed up at his
office with those papers and my membership card, he turned white as a
sheet. You have to realize that his oldest brother ~~was~~ ^{had been} arrested in 1940 for
the same reason. He immediately agreed to the solution I proposed: that I
spend a few hours in his office every day keeping an eye on the books,
and every month I'd take a cut of the profits. That's what we'd done the
first few years in a lot of cases like his, and I made him believe it was
still common. The truth is, by that time everything had changed. Nothing
was like it had been at the beginning. If they caught you red-handed, you
were in big trouble. They'd taken the wind out of our heroic struggle, our
struggle against the the nineteenth-century liberal bourgeoisie and the
international Jewish-Masonic plutocracy. Gone was the imperial-proletarian
idealism that had inspired us back in the good old days. How could they

have let us persecute Masons when the Masons had begun to reorganize
and were secretly trying to get rid of us? But he didn't know anything
about all that. He was living in a dream world and had no idea of those
internal power struggles, which to tell the truth were pretty Byzantine,
and he thought nothing had changed. He thought someone like me, with
my membership card, could do as I liked with someone like him, with those
plumb-lines and T squares in his past. He thought he was totally in my
power and coughed up without a peep, pathetically grateful to save his
skin with a few thousand-pesseta bills. One day he timidly suggested that
I really didn't have to spend so much time with him in his office. I'd told
Malvina I was his partner in the shoe business. Going to work every day
made me seem more important in her eyes, and that was one of the
reasons I liked going there. On the other hand, every day I had more
proof that she took advantage of my absence to see all kinds of
characters, including a few who were pretty shady. So I found myself
having to keep an eye on two things at once: that business and Malvina,
and I couldn't handle both. I thought Malvina was more important; and
since that shoemaker urged me not to work myself to death in his
business--he even said it would be bad for my health--we finally decided
that it'd be enough if I showed up once a month. So I'd call on him the
last day of every month and he'd hand me a wad of bills. I had to trust
him. He assured me that he was paying the cut we'd agreed upon, and I
believed him. I naively believed him. My naivete has always been my
downfall. Well, the last time I called on him, sitting in the same armchair
where I used to sit was the chief of police, waiting for me with a smile
that chilled my blood. The shoemaker'd caught on that I was working free-
lance and had decided to spill the whole story to the new chief of police,
who wasn't one of us, including the bit about the lodge and his brother

who'd been executed! I'd have been in hot water without my card, which--
laying aside false modesty--was one of the first few ever issued. Without
my glorious, heroic past, there'd have been hell to pay! They didn't do
anything to me, but the goose that laid the golden eggs was dead and
gone. As a consolation, so I wouldn't starve to death, they gave me the
job I have now, a low-level job at starvation wages. When Malvina caught
on that the worm had turned, when instead of bringing home a wad of
thousand-pesseta bills at the end of the month I brought home a few
hundred-pesseta ones, she laughed in my face. 'I always thought there was
something fishy about you. So you're actually a poor old fart? If I want to
be poor but happy, there are plenty of young guys around. It's a damned
good thing I didn't completely waste my time. I hereby inform you that
thanks to me, you've got horns so big you couldn't get through the main
door to the cathedral.' That's what the ~~idiot~~ told me. Apparently she
thought I had no idea what she was up to. No idea? She thought I was a
fool! And the truth is there are more imbeciles . . ."

"Couldn't we talk about Soleràs?" I asked, taking advantage of a lull
that followed a deep sigh.

"Soleràs again? You're always pestering me about Soleràs! The hell
with Soleràs! I don't even remember where we were. The time he told me
he was unfit to drink? Yes, that's what he told me: that he was unfit to
drink. 'I'm not fit to drink': those were the jerk's very words. I think
we'd gotten that far in the story, and he even added, 'O, so unfit . . .
Even if I swore it on a stack of Bibles you wouldn't believe me, and that's
precisely the reason, because you'll never believe me, that I have such an
urge to tell you. I've always loved telling people precisely what they can't
grasp! I'm completely incapable of cuckolding anyone, even my best friend!'
He liked to talk nonsense, you know, crap that didn't make any sense. He

was always coming out with gibberish designed to stump everyone. 'Not even my best friend, though it may sound incredible! The reason is simple: I have too much imagination. I always imagine myself in the other's place. I have an extremely vivid imagination in this respect. For example, I can imagine you so clearly, Lamonedà, married to that Miranda girl . . . 'Don't start in with that,' I interrupted him. 'Leave my fiancée out of this.' Because she and I were engaged at the time. 'Are you threatening me? Bah, Lamonedà, you're nothing but a ghost.'"

"It's odd that he should have said that," I interjected.

"What's so odd about it? What's so odd about Soleràs calling me a ghost when he was always talking nonsense? I should mention that he'd always prophesied that if I got married I'd be the most phenomenal cuckold that had been seen not only in Barcelona but in the entire metropolitan area in many years. Those were his very words on one occasion when he was trying to get on my nerves. So that's why when all that stuff happened with Malvina--if I told you all the problems I've had with this Malvina Canals i Gonzàlez you'd never hear the end of it--I remembered Soleràs and the predictions he'd made. According to him, I must have been born during a conjunction of Mars and Venus beneath the sign of Taurus, which, he said, was a very fucked-up astrological ^{combination.} moment. People born at that time, Soleràs said, should never marry. Those were his very words, and I don't think he knew a thing about astrology. He'd shoot off one after another, just to make me mad. Yes, he said 'Bah, you're nothing but a ghost,' and that was the first time he said it, but afterward he'd repeat it over and over."

Suddenly Lamonedà stopped and asked me in a strangely plaintive tone, "Would you mind turning off the light, Cruells? It's shining right in my eyes and giving me a headache."

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We were suddenly submerged in a dusky penumbra that thickened minute by minute, and in the gathering darkness I heard him drone on monotonously, lying on his back on the ottoman, as he had in that other conversation in the café and as he would fifteen years later in the much blacker darkness of another hideout.

X "You're nothing but a ghost, like everyone else," he said, "but you're a rare species of ghost: a solitary cuckold." "What do you mean by that? How can someone be ^{a cuckold} ~~solitary~~ and also a ^{solitary} ~~cuckold~~?" "It's easy! They're guys who've never married and perhaps never will unless some floozie manages to pull the wool over their eyes when they're past sixty" (yes; that's what he predicted, incredible though it may sound), "but they bend their heads beneath the weight of colossal horns. It's a rather rare species, but it exists and you're an example of it: the most perfect example I've come across, a classic specimen!" You can see how he was always ragging me and I had to put up with it. Not only so he wouldn't send me into the trenches, which didn't appeal to me in the slightest, but also so I could carry out an extremely delicate mission. He didn't suspect. He didn't suspect any more than the others, even though he thought he was very shrewd. At least if he did suspect, he never let on. I'll tell you: sometimes I did suspect that he suspected, and I even had the impression on certain occasions that he wanted to show me he didn't give a damn. Once, for example, he said "You, Lamonedá, are a talent of the first magnitude, another Himmler. But in this country talent isn't appreciated. Petty jealousy will always pursue you."

X The sounds of that city on strike gusted in at times through the window, ⁹² ~~and it was~~ like a buzz of swarming bees. I'd forgotten the outside world, in a trance as I listened to that voice droning on and on in the

deepening darkness.

"Often he'd tell me about his aunt, as though I could have cared. 'She's the best of all possible aunts,' he said. 'Leibnitz would have been astounded. Yes, the best of them all! Right now I feel in the mood to talk about her. If I'd told her Nati attracted me, she'd have replied, "Then marry her." Just that simply! Admit that there aren't many aunts like mine. You think I'm ~~saying it to show off~~ ^{bragging}? A millionaire aunt, you're thinking: how could she let her only nephew marry the daughter of her tenant farmer? An ordinary peasant girl. She couldn't even read! Well, that's what my aunt's like. You wouldn't be able to understand her. You could never have an aunt like mine. She spends all her time hanging around Jesuits and Fathers of the Oratory? Well, no more than ~~the~~ ⁹ others, than other aunts. I'd even go so far as to say she's more understanding and forgiving than most toward those unfortunates who never attended Jesuit schools. One day, for example, she said 'Mr. So-and-So is a good soul even if he was educated by Piarists.' You'll find few so understanding! She's very attached to the Jesuits, it's true, but she's even more attached to Fathers of the Oratory. And nonetheless, she's never organized raffles for charity or set up tables in the street. An exceptional aunt! There aren't many of her sort left, and I'm not saying this to show off. It's true that Saint Philomena appears to her from time to time. I can't deny it, but what harm does that do? After all, she doesn't appear often, only once in a blue moon. She doesn't overdo it. I can guarantee that if she'd suspected that Nati attracted me more than the notary's daughter, she have said, "Then listen: don't marry the notary's daughter. Marry Nati." I swear it! That's what my aunt is like! On the other hand, if you knew how much she'd disapprove of your marrying the Miranda girl . . . What a stench of charred horns! A rattling of horns that'll shake the world!' I was sick of

hearing him knock my fiancée. He loved to get on my nerves. He'd repeat, 'You're nothing but a Stendhal' (because I'd shown him some choice excerpts from my novels and since even though he was a jerk, he was a discriminating reader, he had to admit they reminded him of Stendhal, only better). 'You're nothing but a Stendhal,' he insisted, 'a man so accepting, so tolerant, so refined. What a pity women don't appreciate these qualities in a husband. It's true that there's some compensation, since friends appreciate them enormously.' 'I don't have any friends,' I replied. 'You'll have plenty once you've married the Miranda girl. Your house will be full of them!' I'd ended up listening to him the way someone listens to the rain. I didn't pay any attention to his crass insinuations. But there was that business with Captain Ibrahim. He'd gone too far that time."

"So who was this Captain Ibrahim?"

"He was a Moor who commanded some regular troops from Morocco. During the battle of the Ebro, his troops were right down the line from our battalion and we'd visit each other whenever there was a lull in the fighting. That ~~stuff by the Ebro~~ ^{on battle} cost us, as you know, a thousand ~~dead and wounded~~ casualties a day and lasted four months, but on some days there was no fighting and we took advantage of it to have a little fun. It's cozy in this garçonnière, isn't it? A real artist's hangout, oriental style . . ."

He was sitting up and looking around him, pleased at the sight of that "artist's hangout" he considered so oriental and that was now almost pitch black. It was then that he realized I was sitting in a corner on one of the cushions strewn about the room, and he asked me to excuse the fact that he couldn't offer me a chair. He started explaining that when he was inspired he wrote his novels standing up, on that Arabian chest, interrupting himself from time to time to pace to and fro reciting what he'd just written, "to make sure," he said, "that it possesses the cadence,

the polish, that we find in Eugeni d'Ors. If I do say so myself, I've not only surpassed Stendhal but even d'Ors himself."

"Why don't you go on about Soleràs?" I again insisted.

X "Oof," he replied, lying back ^{down} again on the ottoman. He sighed, and after a silence continued, "God damn it, why the hell are you so interested in that moron Soleràs? I can't understand it! Well, the officers in ^{our} ~~that~~ battalion were billeted in an old farmhouse that had been damaged by shells but whose wine press was still intact. It was a deep wine press full of red wine that was aging. We were lucky to be in a region of celebrated wines, almost in the Priorat. We held our drinking parties sitting ^{in chairs} on the wooden cover on that press, right beside the open trapdoor^g. All we had to do was lower a bucket on a rope like someone drawing water from a well. We'd drink straight out of the bucket and we enjoyed letting that wine, which was almost as black as ink, run down our faces and chests. It was warming, invigorating; the smell of wine drowned out the stench of corpses. Ibrahim was a strapping fellow about thirty years old, a mulatto, almost a black, with thick lips that were always wet with saliva. A hero, you know? Leading his men, bayonet at the ready, he'd stormed I don't know how many villages. I don't know how Geoffrey of Bouillon managed in his crusades, but he sure didn't fight with pillows. Ibrahim was a rough and ready guy ~~full of spunk~~. Soleràs often invited him to supper. He enjoyed hearing him tell stories. He'd get him talking. He'd egg him on to tell us about his deeds with his bayonet and with . . . why are you looking at me like that?"

X I wasn't looking at him. I was looking toward the window, a square of light in the darkness, and besides, he'd spoken without taking his eyes off the ceiling. He'd said "Why are you looking at me" without glancing at me and without my looking at him. Could he see me in those mirrors?

"That's war, and you don't make war with pillow-fights! Ibrahim ate supper with us almost every night, and we'd have long chats by the light from a lantern that attracted swarms of mosquitoes, since we weren't far from the marshes by the river. At that time of night, the machine guns and mortars had fallen silent. The whole front was still. Each time we dropped the bucket into the wine press, the splash echoed for a while beneath our feet, and every now and again the quiet was broken by a big field gun firing some five or six miles behind us. Sometimes we could hear the shells whistling over our heads, like the wind in a pine grove. They'd burst on the other side, in the enemy lines. Soleràs made the Moor drink and egged him on to tell us about his exploits. And as the Moor talked he'd laugh, showing his canine teeth, strong and yellow as a dog's. Soleràs roared with laughter too, but there was something forced about his laughter, as though it were cracked. It sounded like a hen clucking. The big shells whistled overhead, and they made the night seem even more still and silent. As for Ibrahim, he laughed so hard that one time he even pissed in his pants. Ibrahim: he was so carefree, so cheerful, such a terrific guy! Sometimes his accent was so strong that it was almost impossible to understand him. His flat nose gave out neighing sounds, but he was so funny when he'd start telling some juicy tidbit. He was especially funny imitating women's voices and how they'd kicked and screamed and punched. He knew how to embroider a story and spin out the good parts. As you know, we had to let the Moors do things their own way. They have their own customs and their own idea of how to fight a war. We had to let them follow their holy traditions. Soleràs liked to get him drunk so he'd talk, he was in Heaven listening to his exploits. After we'd taken Gandesa, where he'd led one of his most daring surprise attacks, people said they were going to promote Ibrahim to major. He

could have ended up as a general! But Ibrahim . . . Ibrahim disappeared . .
 . good old Ibrahim . . ."

Lamoneda sighed disconsolately.

"He came by at suppertime. He left shortly before dawn. He was never seen again, and precisely that night, his last, he'd told the spiciest of all his stories. How funny those stories were when he told them in his guttural, rasping voice. He'd told us how in an isolated farmhouse, still in Aragon but ~~right on~~^{near} the Catalan border, he'd come across a girl in mourning who couldn't have been more than fourteen years old, a girl who could only speak Catalan, which is common among the peasants around there. It was as if they were Catalans, Ibrahim said, and you know what our orders were: show no mercy. The girl kept biting him. At one point she managed to slip free and grabbed the big knife they used to butcher hogs and almost turned him into a eunich. Ibrahim sure knew how to tell a yarn! But this was the last one he told. We never saw him again."

"In an isolated farmhouse, right near Catalonia, a girl in mourning . .
 ." I muttered. He wasn't listening. He went on, "Once he'd disappeared, Soleràs drank more than ever. 'Don't you think,' he'd ask his guests, 'that this wine is aging very well? It's amazing how it gets stronger and has more bouquet with every passing week.' A colonel, a lawyer, came to investigate and Soleràs offered him a drink. 'Wine from our own estates,' he said, 'an exceptional vintage. Please, try it and pass judgment for yourself, since you're a judge.' The bucket was lowered and raised, giving off an underground rumble as it broke through the surface, a rumble that deepened as the level fell and the wine press emptied. 'It's odd,' Soleràs told that lawyer-colonel, 'how they always try and annoy me about disappearances. When I was with the Reds, it was a matter of cans of condensed milk. They were about to shoot me over a few cans of

X condensed milk ~~Peasant brand~~. As you know, the Reds'll shoot you for any old thing. Here it's a question of Moorish captains instead of cans of milk . . . ' And he laughed that clucking laugh of his, watching the colonel drink. With his rosy cheeks and white mustache, he looked like a lord from olden days. 'Lord lawyer-colonel,' Soleràs asked, 'what does your lordship think of ectoplasm? And as far as dead cats are concerned . . . would your lordship deny the existence of dead cats? Very dainty dishes, I

X can assure you!' The colonel laughed cheerfully. He liked being called 'your lordship' because he was an Anglophile. He was a monarchist, loyal to the king, more liberal than that bitch ^{maniac} Cristina. The army was full of them! It's people like him, together with the clergy, that screwed us. Freemasons! We drowned in an ocean of holy water and disgraceful liberalism . . . And

X besides, he wasn't a real officer but a civil magistrate they'd inducted. He laughed merrily hearing himself called 'your lordship' ~~my lord~~, he laughed as wine dribbled down his chin without understanding a word of Soleràs's ravings.

'Dainty as can be and very fit to drink. Judge for yourself, my lord, since you've come here to judge us. Wine from our very own estates: an extraordinary vintage, better than 1902 sauterne!' The field guns kept sending those big shells north. From time to time we'd hear one whistle overhead like a gentle breeze far above us. It was late at night. The colonel left, drunk as a lord, with dark red wine dripping from his mustache, delighted to have met the celebrated Soleràs. Yes, Soleràs was

X celebrated throughout the army for his crazy pranks and ^{wild} talk. People fought over the honor of being his friends. No one could make head or tail of what he said, but they acted as though they found it full of subtle irony and profundity. It gave them a reputation for intelligence and refinement. Characters like that colonel thought they should act like intellectuals, and Soleràs gave them the chance. As for me, I was happy at

the time. The Battle of the Ebro cost us a thousand soldiers a day, but there, far from the trenches and near that bottomless wine press, I was as happy as someone lying in bed under nice dry covers listening to the rain overhead, happy as a mouse who's burrowed into a big cheese! They all tried to act like sophisticated intellectuals, laughing at Soleràs's quips, and nonetheless they couldn't see what was in front of their noses . . . Our bottomless wine press wasn't all that bottomless. The dead cat was inside it."

"The dead cat?"

"Yes, it wasn't all that bottomless! None of those subtle, sophisticated intellectuals, lawyers or not, had caught on. One morning Soleràs, who usually spent his days in the trenches, stayed in that farmhouse to take care of some paperwork. The two of us were alone. As I've said, we had our chairs and table on the wooden cover on the wine press, whose trapdoor was always open. That trapdoor had hinges like a shutter, so it could be kicked shut. At one point, Soleràs ~~kicked the press~~ ^{stamped on it}, and the sound echoed, rolling back and forth. 'What a bunch of champion luses!' he exclaimed. 'This sounds emptier than a tomb.' I picked up the bucket to drop it in, and when I hauled it up I found the handle had hooked a fez that was still fire-engine red despite the fact that it had been soaking in wine all those weeks. I grabbed it. ~~Red~~ ^{purple} wine dripped off it. I gaped at it in amazement! I couldn't believe my own eyes! Soleràs turned pale and looked at me without saying anything. Suddenly he snatched it away, threw it back in the wine press, and kicked the trapdoor shut. How it reverberated! Like a bass fiddle; the roof shook . . . From then on, no one was allowed to drink from that wine press. Major Soleràs's orders. I was the only one who knew his secret. I could have ruined him. But he didn't give a damn about me; he didn't give a damn about anything. I was fed up

to here. I didn't want him to pull any more stupid stunts that could get me in trouble."

X We heard the bell in the church by the old army hospital strike seven. Lamonedà had stopped talking so he could count the chimes. I said, "When we ran into each other in that café ~~on the Ronda~~ ^{de Sant Pau}, you said two men you could trust followed you when Soleràs took you outside the camp."

"Seven o'clock," he replied. "I'll have to get back to Pelayo Street. You remember everything. Yes, that's what I said in that café. You've got a good memory, but mine's even better. Soleràs was taking me further and further away, but that wasn't during the Battle of the Ebro. It was later. It was months later, on the Plana d'Urgell, a few weeks before we took Barcelona. In the middle of the night, he dragged me along toward the enemy lines. And since the whole thing was starting to make me suspicious, I gave the warning sign. There were two clerks on our battalion's staff, two privates no one would have suspected of being more than ordinary soldiers. Even Soleràs, who thought he was so smart and commanded our battalion, had no idea. They were Falangists, but for real, like me! No Anglophiles, monarchists, or clergy allowed! True idealists! From before the war. We quietly kept an eye on the officers, especially the ones who, like Soleràs, had changed sides. We were very well organized and so discreet that no one except those involved had any idea what we were up to. When Soleràs asked me to accompany him on that moonlit stroll, I alerted my two men, 'Follow us at a distance and make sure he doesn't spot you. I don't know what's on his mind ~~tonight~~ ² . . .' I knew them from way back. They'd worked under me in Barcelona. They skulked along behind us. Soleràs never noticed; he was so nearsighted . . . And besides, he was too drunk to see straight. I'd never seen him so

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drunk. A cold wind was blowing, since it was the beginning of January 1939 and though it was a mild winter it was one in the morning. The moon was out, our men were sleeping, there wasn't a patch of snow on the whole rolling plain that stretched to the horizon. Our men were camped out in the open. They'd built a bonfire in the middle of each group. We were in the last few months of the war in Catalonia. As soon as we'd set foot on Catalan soil we'd repealed the statute of autonomy and started burning and pillaging. We could see our army's campfires strung out across the ~~dips and crests~~ ^{hills valleys landscape} in the landscape, marking our front lines: hundreds, maybe thousands of them as far as the eye could see. The Reds didn't dare to light them because at the first spark our artillery would have started raining shells on them, so there was nothing but pitch dark ahead of us. Soleràs kept walking. ^{9"} 'You see that blackness? That's the outer darkness. That's where the vanquished, the eternal vanquished gnash their teeth, the sons of darkness . . . or who knows: maybe they're the crucified. Who will ever know? Whoever they are, that's where I belong.' He kept walking, dragging me along with him. I was getting jumpy. A madman is capable of anything. 'Where are you trying to lead me?' 'Believe me, Lamonedà, it'd be embarrassing for us. You and I would never make a respectable pair of victors. The way we look . . . ' 'Lay off about the way I look.' Then he replied, and these were his very words, 'All you ever think about is what's between ~~women's~~ ^{the woman's} legs, and nonetheless, one must think about other things from time to time, if only for variety's sake. All you're worrying about is that Miranda girl. You think you can do as you please with her. You still haven't caught on that every one of them has her own statute of autonomy inside her head and that when you ^{come} ~~get~~ down to it, they do as they like.' 'The Miranda girl has nothing to do with the statute of autonomy. What are you jabbering about?' 'Maybe you'll manage

to marry her. Brute force can work miracles, who would dare to deny it?

But no one, not even God in Heaven (that's right, not even God in Heaven) can stop her from giving you the biggest pair of horns the world has ever seen. I said not even God in Heaven, and I'll repeat it. I don't know if you've ever heard of free will.' 'Now you want to talk about free will?' He pulled me along toward some woods between our positions and the enemy's. Once we were there, I refused to follow him any further.

A 'Where do you want to go? Can't you see ~~the others~~ ^{they'll} catch us?' 'The ~~others~~ ^{others}? The others don't exist. Only I exist; outside my "I," everything's phantasmagoria.' 'They'll send us a round of mortar shells, and then you'll

see if they're phantasmagoria.' 'Let's not squabble over trifles, Lamonedá. A round of mortar shells? Bah, the only thing I care about is switching sides.' 'Switching sides? What do you mean?' 'Join the others. I always want to join the others.' 'But didn't you just say the others don't exist?' 'It's precisely because they don't exist that one joins them. The bad part is that once one's joined them, they start existing. That's why I've been switching sides all my life: always joining the others. Another man's wife, for example: how alluring she is! But when she threatens to turn into your own wife . . . War would be as intolerable as a bed in which one could never change position if one couldn't join the others from time to time, switch sides. My God, let's have a little variety! A while with the Reds, a while with the fascists, and then a while more with the Reds while there's still time. Too much of the same thing is boring.' 'I glanced over my shoulder. The two of them were there. That moron continued, 'I believe, Lamonedá, that we should do the decent thing and end this war in the only elegant fashion possible: that is, by losing it.' 'You can't mean that now . . . ' 'Now's the ideal, perfect moment, now when there's not the slightest doubt about who will lose.' ^{He} He said plenty of other stuff, plenty.

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X He was inspired that night. At one point he asked me, 'What do you think of the ancients' serenity?' 'The ancients?' "Larvam argenteam abtulit servus." I suppose you've read Petronius.' 'Naturally.' 'And Horace? Admit it: you've never read Horace. We quote Horace because we read Petronius. Well, that's life. No one reads poor Quintus Horatius Flaccus, and nonetheless, he was the Baudelaire of antiquity! Poor little Horace, poor little dead kitten. I'm the only man on earth who still reads you! And if I told you, Lamonedà, that he was a marvelous poet, you wouldn't believe me!' And he started reciting whole poems by Horace:

Eheu, fugaces, Postume, Posthume,

labuntur anni . . .

X "'Poor darling Horace,' he went on, 'poor dead kitten. You've been dead too long for anyone to read you. And that's why people are always talking about the ancients' serenity. They think they're so serene because they've ~~never~~ ^{haven't} seen hide ~~or~~ ^g hair of them. The ancients' serenity comes from not reading them! Tell me: was Horace any more serene than Baudelaire? Cretins of the world: tell me once and for all! Cretins of the world, unite! The day of triumph is at hand!' He went on blathering about a million different things: about dainty dishes, streetcars, ectoplasm, and dead cats again. 'In Egypt they've found mummified dead cats as carefully embalmed as Tutankhamen.' 'Listen, Soleràs: if it was to talk about Tutankhamen that you brought me out in this clammy night air . . .'
'Lamoneda, you think I'm raving when I'm actually trying to make you understand a few things too simple for you to grasp. So simple! It's the simplest things that morons grasp the least. I'll tell you simply that I don't want her to think--when someday, perhaps years from now, she hears about me--that I deserted back then because your side was winning . . . I'd be a fool in her eyes! And with good reason. I'd be fixed in her

memory, reduced to the size of just another second-rate Eugeni d'Ors. And I want to be in her eyes, for all eternity, someone unique, someone who never, never did what others did. So you can see how simple it is: at this moment, what concerns me is not to leave too ridiculous a memory of my humble person. I don't care if we never see each other again in this life, but when she thinks of me I want . . . 'Are you talking about that girl in the photo? When I think ~~how we~~^{she} tried to draw a mustache on her.' 'Don't bring that up. You don't want to remind me of that. That pig's-snout of yours . . . ' He tugged at my arm but I jerked myself free. 'Don't call me a pig! You've called me that once too often. I'm fed up! And I know where Ibrahim is!' 'You? Bah! Poor dead kitten of my soul. Only God knows where he is right now. And to the best of my knowledge, Lamonedá, you're not God.' 'All they'd have to do is fish him out of that wine press,' I replied. He paid no attention. Instead he changed the subject, 'Listen, Lamonedá. I've spent my whole life pretending to feel the opposite of what I felt, but at this moment, as you can see, I feel an irresistible urge to tell the whole truth to you and you alone. Why you? Who knows? Perhaps precisely because you're a pig.' 'Don't start in with that again. All they'd have to do is open the wine press to . . . ' 'Have them open it. What do you think they'd find there? The treasures of Golconda? The nelumbos del norte and all that crap Rubén Darío ran off at the mouth about? What wouldn't I give to find out what the hell the nelumbos del norte are? Don't kid yourself: there's nothing but a dead cat in that wine press: Ibrahim. Ibrahim was a pig. Of course, you're one too, but he overdid it. Yes, that goddamned pig overdid it! We're all a little piggish, but to that extent . . . Believe me, Lamonedá: moderation in all things. That fucking Ibrahim went too far. His excesses were his undoing. It's remarkable how I couldn't resist the temptation to ~~stun~~^{bash} him with that old beam that lay

forgotten in a corner, while he knelt down to lower the bucket . . .

Without a peep, he fell into the wine press! It's remarkable . . . whereas you . . . O, you're almost as big a pig as he was. So why is it I haven't ~~crushed~~ ^{bashed} you yet? Because you're a cowardly pig, you're a worm. I've always been appalled by the sight of squashed worms. Something green and slimy oozes out of them that gives me the creeps. Disgust has no limits; it's another infinity."

Night had fallen and Lamonedà still droned on, lying on his back on that ottoman, reciting his monologue in the darkness just as fifteen years later he'd recite other endless monologues. He talked and talked as though he'd forgotten my presence.

"You, Soleràs, are as big a pig as anyone. I've seen you reading those trashy novels.' 'You mean Roland Cuckolded? When I start a novel, if no one's cuckolded the hero by the third page, I toss it aside. I don't care for authors who beat around the bush. I can be piggish or sublime according to what phase the moon's in, because there's nothing wrong with being sublime now and again. My God, let's have a little variety! It's boring to always be a pig. It would be equally erroneous ~~to~~ ^{to} always be sublime.' And imagine this: he started talking about his economics professor, one he'd had back when he was studying law. 'He was sublime, always sublime, perhaps not very, but at least somewhat sublime. You had to hear the pathos, the exalted tone in which he pronounced names like Ricardo, Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, and above all, Sismondi. When he said "Sismondi," his voice trembled like Llibert Milmany's. He explained the law of supply and demand with such tragic tremolos! And about cyclical crises! He was so sublime that we were all sick to death of him!' ^{guy} Then he started talking about his aunt again. 'You see, I wouldn't have dared to tell my aunt that Nati's legs interested me more than stalactites. I was

twelve years old and I hadn't read Dostoevski yet. Despite what the legend says, I wasn't that precocious. For the moment I was still working my way through Bossuet's funeral sermons, but not long thereafter . . . Would you believe that basically I've always been a good boy? As good a boy as you could hope to meet, capable of reading everything Bossuet ever wrote, capable of swallowing any story, including stories about ectoplasm and similar drivel--which in any case are no more unbelievable than drivel like the Oedipus complex or the dictatorship of the proletariat being the path to a happier tomorrow. I swallowed all those stories, one after the other. I was capable of giving a Christian burial to every dead cat I found squashed in the middle of the road. I was capable of anything. But our professor of political economy thought he was as sublime as Othello. From the podium, his fiery gaze swept the benches we sat on till it came to rest in a corner of the ceiling. It was something he'd practiced. That way he could show his profile to the girls, who always sat together in the top row in the opposite corner. Some of them were real knockouts, particularly one who always got A's in canon law, blond and pale as Desdemona. But this pallid Desdemona, who was more up on canon law than political economy, couldn't have cared less about him. The big jerk thought he had a profile like a Roman medallion; he hadn't caught on that you can't be Othello and Brutus at the same time. Desdemona, who was pale but not stupid, paid no attention to him. On the other hand, she wouldn't give me the time of day either, but neither would any other woman I've ever known. Every last one of them, without exception, has told me, one after the other, that they could talk to me as to a brother! Ever since the tender age of twelve . . . The very first one was Nati. Those dark legs and that bold stare! She was twelve too, a peasant girl, the kind Ibrahim was wild about. And speaking of Ibrahim, why would you want to open

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that wine press? Why would you rat on me to that lawyer-colonel, who behaved like a perfect gentleman? Can't you see it would upset his lordship to have to try me? You have to admit Ibrahim was exceptionally fit to drink. That wine has aged marvelously since he's been floating in it. It's taken on an outstanding bouquet! So why would you want to fish him out? Leave him where he is; he does no evil.' And having said 'he does no evil,' without transition he started talking about the problem of evil. He'd run off at the mouth on this subject before. 'Logically, there should be nothing but evil,' he said, 'and in fact that's what all you morons unconsciously think.' That's why you pedantically declare, "Think the worst of people and you won't be mistaken." God, how pedantic you morons can be! If you were just morons, I could put up with you, but pedants too . . . You were able to invent the word malice. You could get that far but no farther. Every language on earth includes this word and lacks another, bonice, which is equally essential. No language has been able to create that one! That's because nations invent their languages and the only wisdom decent, hard-working folk understand is wisdom used to do evil. Wisdom to do good? It wouldn't even occur to them. Poor Saint Paul, you wasted your time advising us to be "wise unto that which is good, and simple concerning evil." That would be bonice, and as you can see, no nation on earth ^{has} been capable of inventing this word. They don't miss it and haven't a clue that it might be necessary. Everyone aspires to be more malicious than others, to see evil everywhere, including places where no one else sees it! To see goodness? What's the point? And in fact they're right. In fact there should be nothing but evil, just as there should be nothing but absolute darkness, absolute cold: nothingness, in a word. Nothingness is the only thing that would present no enigmas. Imagine nothingness. Use your imagination; make an effort for once in

your life: absolute nothingness, total vacuum. Not even a vacuum, since space wouldn't exist! And nonetheless, a streetcar in the middle of that vacuum. Please, imagine that: a streetcar in a vacuum. To make it more precise, imagine one of the first electric streetcars from the turn of the century. When you and I were kids, a few were still running in Barcelona, glorious survivors from the era of the Spanish-American War. Those wonderful streetcars from the last century! Streetcars that had carried those ladies they had back then with long dresses and muffs and bustles: those streetcars they had back then, with those ladies they had back then! Will we ever again see times or streetcars like those? So there's your absolute vacuum, but with one of those streetcars in the middle of it. A streetcar and nothing else! Do you know how many philosophical problems that would pose? The very thought chills one's blood! How they'd squabble over it's existence and essence! The mystery wouldn't be the vacuum but the streetcar. Who put it there, in the middle of all that nothingness? But my God, what am I saying? What meaning would the expression "in the middle of" have referring to nothingness? Since nothingness is boundless, it has no middle. Could it have a backside? The streetcar would be smack in the middle of nothingness's backside like the bustle on one of those ladies from the belle époque. Unfathomable mysteries! But let's get to the point: that streetcar would be there all by itself, stabilized in the vacuum by inertia since there would be no gravitational fields. A streetcar with its trolley, a big, ~~potent~~ ^{powerful strong} trolley that would rise up solemnly and turn eternally, in hopeless melancholy, for all eternity in the heart of emptiness and endless time . . . What? You don't like streetcars? Well then imagine a dead cat instead. We're not going to squabble over that. Whatever you imagine, the problem would be the same. Nothing ought to exist, and yet it's undeniable that something exists. No matter what you do, something

X will always exist. Eppur si muove. Foiled, nonetheless has to wrathfully
slink away: this is the mystery. ⁹ 'I can't see any mystery in that,' I said.
'Things exist because they have to exist, God damn it! What's so
mysterious about that? Where's the mystery?' 'Where? Who will ever know?
Who will ever know where this mystery is, yet it's everywhere! Why, for
example, at the decisive moment, when at last I was going to marry the
only woman I'd ever truly loved, did I run away? Why did I flee when I
was going to get what I'd most passionately desired? What force deters us
at such moments? Our virtue? Don't make me laugh! No, please; that'd be
all we need! If I thought of it that way, I'd end up full of self-confidence
like some stupid self-made man. The virtue's not in us, we're not self-
made men. On our own, we're nothing but shit! Virtue comes from outside
us, but from where? If I told you I saw flaming letters inscribed across
the firmament saying: Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife . . . If I
told you I saw them with my very own eyes, you wouldn't believe me! But
I saw those flaming letters, written from west to east, in broad daylight .
. . I admit that I've told some lies in my life, some real whoppers. I admit
it, but I'd like you to believe at least this one: I saw letters of fire
spanning the firmament . . . A hallucination? What difference does that
make? That's how virtue comes to us. It comes from outside, when we
least expect it, like a hallucination, when we least want it. It gets in our
way, keeps us from doing what we feel like doing. I'd played all kinds of
dirty tricks to seduce her. One stops at nothing when one desires a woman
with all one's instincts and all one's soul . . . And then I ran away! I
know you can't understand a word I'm saying; that's why I'm telling you.
If I had the impression that you understood, I wouldn't say another word.
You're an operator; you never miss an opportunity. You'd think you'd acted
like a fool if . . . ⁹ 'Naturally,' I said. 'Naturally,' he replied. 'Well, would

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you like to know everything I dared to do to Nati in the course of that summer, the last one we spent in that house in Godella? Nati was the tenant farmer's daughter. They still let us play together because they still considered us kids. We were both twelve years old. It was toward the end of the season. We were playing in a field not far from the house. There were three new haystacks from the last harvest. There was also new-mown hay strewn on the ground and it smelled like that: like new, warm hay. Nati lay down at the foot of one of the haystacks, with her hands clasped behind her head, looking up at the sky to catch, as she put it, the first star. Often we played at seeing who could "catch" it first. On ordinary days she wore a kind of slippers that easily ^{slid} ~~slipped~~ off her feet, and since she'd crossed her legs so one foot dangled, the slipper fell off. I grabbed that foot, which was still dangling and which was very brown on top and very pink underneath, and started tickling it while she squirmed and giggled. Since ~~that~~ ^{the} haystack was in the way, they could hear her laughter from the farmhouse but they couldn't see what we were doing. And actually that's all we did: I tickled her and she giggled. This lasted until she slapped me to make me stop tickling her. And that was the end of my great erotic adventure that summer! And the oddest thing is that I've never had another. That was the farthest I ever dared to go with a woman. Of course, I mean with one who wasn't a professional, so don't try and make a saint out of me ~~because of my virginity~~. If you knew how many times it's come back to me, down through the years: that small, nervous foot, so brown on top and so pink underneath. I can still feel it in my hands, ^I fluttering like a bird trying to escape. How exciting that smell of new, warm hay was! If you only knew . . . Anyway, I suppose you find this story disappointing. ^{Oh} 'Naturally,' I replied. While he was telling me this trivia, he kept pulling me along through those woods toward the

enemy lines, and then he went back to good and evil, Heaven and hell. He was raving. 'The mystery is Heaven,' he said. 'The mystery is goodness! Hell's nothing but sheer crassness, absurdity, everything that's senseless: that is, almost everything. Notice that I say "almost." It's amazing how little attention people pay to this "almost," a small detail, and nonetheless it's this "almost" that . . . Ah, we'd be buried in the mud of absurdity right up to our hairlines without this "almost"! But there's this "almost," and thanks to it we can raise our eyes, just our eyes, and gaze heavenward.' ^{qu} 'Sure,' I replied grumpily. 'That's been said a million times. If we raise our eyes heavenward, we see the moon and stars. If you brought me here to share these sensational discoveries . . . If you told me that by gazing heavenward, you could see some sexy broad on a balcony and look up her skirt . . . ' 'It's not as simple as you think,' he said. 'Sometimes you look up and don't see anything, neither moon nor sexy legs. Nothing, absurdity everywhere! Endless nothingness, endless darkness, the physicists' absolute zero, and--the absurdest thing of all--endless stars, galaxies and more galaxies, all the same, millions of millions of monotonous, stupid galaxies: sheer hell! So that when a moron like you gazes heavenward, what you see is a hell much more terrifying than earth. And nonetheless . . . Eppur si muove! There's something else, something else that surrounds us like the very air we breathe: a yearning for glory that spurs us on. What is glory? An empty word? Is vainglory the only glory? Often it's nothing more; words and more words, sound and fury ^{signifying} ~~over~~ nothing. But sometimes, in rare moments, we feel it as it truly is: plenitude of meaning, the opposite of absurdity. It's nothing but that, and that's why we seek it. Something that has complete meaning! That's worthwhile in itself, that's absolute! Our error is to seek it in this world. It's not that it can't be found here, but we couldn't stand it for more than an instant. It would

X destroy us. If it doesn't destroy us, ^{that} it's because it dissipates, or rather it turns into monotony and ends up being absurd. That tiny foot, so pink and brown, so nervous, was glory. Yes it was, but I couldn't spend my whole life tickling it. It was glory, but on the condition that it only last an instant and not be repeated. Glory in this world turns into monotony if it lasts more than an instant. An instant . . . that instant . . . if it stopped there . . . Instant, halt! But if it stops, it has duration. It ceases to be eternity and turns into time again. It would have to halt but not last. Lamonedà, I don't know if you've heard of the cactus solerassus . . . 'Now you want to talk about cactuses?' 'It spends a thousand years getting ready to bloom for an instant. But it's never bloomed; it's never known an instant of glory. When I was about to know it, when I'd finally seduced that woman (and I'm not talking about Nati now, my dear moron), when all I had to do was take that last step to make her mine, I said "Bah" and ran away.' 'Didn't you just say you'd seen some flaming letters . . . ' 'It's all the same. Let's not quibble over details. Flaming letters?' 'That's what you said before.' 'Well, I can't remember,' he said, 'but it's the same difference. I said "Bah," and I vanished! I was scared of that instant. Suddenly, when I had it in my grasp, I felt its full terror. Because that instant is a whiff of eternity; and eternity is terrifying.' At this point Soleràs started reciting something in Italian. He was completely out of his mind, and besides, I don't know much Italian."

In the dark, from my corner, I whispered,

X Quando leggemo^m il disiato riso
esser baciato da cotanto amante,
questi, che mai da me non fia diviso,
la bocca mi baciò tutto tremante . . .

"What are you muttering about now?" he asked. "Are you saying your

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X a rosary or something?"

Yes, that's what he said, "Are you saying your rosary or something?":
the same words he'd use fifteen years later in another hideout. The very
same words; and his droning voice immediately resumed its monologue.

X "You don't understand, Lamonedà," Soleràs said. 'You're stuck in time
the way a fish is in water, unable to imagine there could be anything else.
But how ~~fast~~ ^{freely} one breathes outside it! The pendulum stops: eternity. What a
silence that stilled pendulum creates, what a silence! An asphyxiating
silence . . . We're out of the water; boundless free air. Time no longer
exists, the instant has been frozen, but what instant? An instant of glory
or an instant of absurdity?' At that point I interrupted him, 'You're
nuttier than a fruitcake, Soleràs.' 'Just like my aunt,' he said. 'It runs in
the family. What of it? If you and all the others think you're not a bunch
of nuts . . . At least my aunt had something special. She was an original.
The world's going from bad to worse, more and more vulgar every day.
Soon there won't be any aunts left who see visions of Saint Philomena.
Soon aunts will bore you to tears yakking about planned economies,
X nationalized banks, class structures, and alienation of the proletariat. That's
what aunts of the future will gab about! And the world will long for the
good old days when aunts talked about Jesuits and Fathers of the Oratory.
But alas, it'll be too late. Today, it's mostly nephews who are Marxists;
tomorrow it'll be aunts. A day will come when aunts will believe in Marx
as naively as they now believe in Saint Philomena's apparitions. Class
struggle? And why not aunt-and-nephew struggle? Wouldn't that be as
coherent a theory of history as any other? We could say all history has
been nothing but a struggle between aunts and nephews. We could also say
it's been pure shit. Much ado about nothing, a puzzle we can never solve-
X -if it has a solution--because we only have a few pieces and they don't

even fit together. All those fairy tales about feudal revolution, bourgeois revolution, proletarian revolution: hogwash! None of that exists. Only passions exist. Sinful passions, of course. Instead of nobility say pride; instead of bourgeoisie say avarice; instead of proletariat say envy. They try to make us believe there was a bourgeois revolution against feudal lords, that the bourgeoisie burned their castles. Do you believe that, Lamonedà: that there ever was a bourgeois capable of setting fire to a

castle? Hell no! They don't burn them down. They restore them. More feudally Gothic than ever!' 'Naturally,' I said. 'Naturally,' he replied. 'The bourgeoisie . . . To think some of them spend their whole lives tirelessly

manufacturing the same thing. And to think anyone could bear grudge ^a toward those who perform such selfless tasks. What a crazy, mixed-up world! But now a new revolution is in the making: nephews against aunts.

A new passion is about to go down in history, and its name is lust.

Everyone's preparing to liberate himself from his complexes! Nephews of the world, unite!' 'Listen, Soleràs, you're out of your mind . . . ' He

repeated, cupping his hands to his mouth, 'Nephews of the world, unite!' shouting as though he wanted the Reds to hear us. Then he went on in a

normal tone of voice, 'But you can count me out. I'm fed up with history. You all can go on if you want; I'm fed up to here. Let the seven deadly

sins go on squabbling among themselves. I want no part of it. Do you think if I were born again, if I had to start all over again, that I'd make

the same dumb mistakes? I've asked myself that question many times, and I'm sure I wouldn't make the same ones. Absolutely not! I'd make others.

My God, let's have a little variety or we'll be bored to death . . .

Nonetheless, that Ibrahim overdid it. By Jove, there was a ^{fellow} ~~guy~~ who'd

overcome all his complexes and ^{repentances} ~~repentances~~. As you know, I spent a year and a half with the Reds. All things considered, they're as bizarre as

your crowd. But I can't deny that they had some remarkable specialties unknown on your side: for example, pulling monks' and nuns' mummies from their tombs. That does show a certain imagination. I'd like that fucking Marx to tell me why the proletariat pulls mummies out of tombs, in what way disinterred mummies can serve the proletariat's class interests. On the other hand, one thing I never saw or heard about over there, as God is my witness, is . . . Well, actually, I don't want to lie. I do know of one case. Once, in a village occupied by an anarchist column, there was a retarded girl, a poor idiot who could only express herself in grunts, who used to wander through the camp, attracted by the leftovers from the field kitchen. One night, a sentinel abused her. The column's committee (as you know, at first the anarchist columns had no officers, only committees that voted on everything) voted unanimously to execute him by firing squad. And that's the only story of that sort I ever heard, so help me God! I growled sarcastically, 'If you're trying to make me believe they're all angels . . .' 'Far from it! Don't be a jackass! But all the same . . . all the same, your Ibrahim overdid it! It's odd how the most we can do is ape God like a bunch of monkeys, very odd. Like funhouse mirrors. Our pride's a distorted image of His glory, our avarice of His providence, our lust of His love . . . What a bunch of obscene monkeys we are! The seven deadly sins, always the same; what threadbare imaginations! But if one loses interest in the seven deadly sins, how else can one have some fun? With pure reason? Pure reason was crucified once and for all in this world, and not by brute force as so many simpletons think but by brute reason. In fact, poor old brute force washed its hands of it . . . It's an old problem: foreigners getting mixed up in stuff they can't possibly understand, swarms of foreigners sticking their noses in messes they can't make head or tail of and then washing their hands of it. Yes, they wash

their hands of it, but the harm's been done: Jesus is crucified. Foreigners!

They're to blame; it's all their fault!' 'What's their fault?' 'Everything!

What can you expect from people who are wild about bullfights?' And all

of a sudden he started yelling, 'Take the photo! I don't want it!' And he

gave it to me. He was carrying it, I suppose with the idea of taking it

with him, but he must have changed his mind. And he gave it to me!

'Draw a big, droopy mustache on her. I've had it up to here!' So he gave

it to me. I've still got it in that Arabian chest, along with all the others

and my manuscripts. It's nothing special, but I like to keep everything.

One never knows what might come in handy. But it'd be so much work

trying to find ^{it} among all the others. One of these days I'll hunt for it and

show it to you. You'll see there was absolutely nothing special about her.

I don't know what Soleràs saw in her. I'd swear she was a married woman.

She'd written something on the back that left no room for doubt and that

her husband wouldn't have liked one bit if he'd seen it. Why did he give

it to me? How should I know? All I know is he gave it to me, shouting at

the top of his lungs, 'I've had it up to here!' Everything he did and said

was crazy. The stories he told bored me stiff. What could be duller than

that adventure with Nati? Humph, a blabbermouth . . . My novels, on the

other hand, what a difference! My characters are in another league:

brilliant diplomats, duchesses with names that set you dreaming, like

Atalanta. Now I've set out to pull them all together. I'm working on a

single, supreme novel that'll be the synthesis of them all. It'll be a

masterpiece, the culmination of a lifetime of work. An epic tale of heroic,

imperial youth! An enormous task that'll take many years . . .

Several years after that afternoon in Lamonedá's garçonnière, Lluís and Trini visited Barcelona for the first time since the war. The years ^{blat} ~~got~~ tangled up in my memory. So many years, my God, so many identical years in that dark and endless tunnel . . . How can I tell one from another? The archbishop frequently summoned me. He'd grown very fond of me. In fact, he loved me like a son, and I, ^{who'd} ~~who~~ never met my father and ^{could} ~~can~~ barely recall my mother--she died when I was four--I, who'd grown more and more neurotic, ended up loving him as much as if I'd been his son. Yes, his son, but ^I ~~like~~ a bad son. Like a son whose father is an illiterate bumpkin and who knows perfectly well that his father's an illiterate bumpkin and a fool, a boor, but instead of generously passing over these ~~faults~~ ^{heart} defects the bad son broods over them and scorns his father in the depths of his ~~self~~ ^{heart}. The truth is he inspired a bizarre mixture of filial love and contempt in me, and try as I might, I couldn't change.

Hardly a month or even a week passed without his summoning me from the mountains ^{for a} ~~to chat for a while~~. Since there was only one bus to Barcelona early in the morning and another that made the return trip in the evening, I had to spend the whole day in town. I enjoyed wandering aimlessly through its maze of streets and alleyways, full of memories from my now-distant youth. I especially enjoyed visiting that industrial town where I'd had my parish. Everyone enjoys seeing places where he's suffered . . . I'd take the subway and then a bus all the way to the end of the line. And I'd walk down those broad, muddy streets that resembled unpaved highways. There were only a few buildings, ^{scattered} ~~scattered here and there~~, oddly tall, narrow buildings that made the town's desolation even more desolate. At that time automobiles were still rare and I could stroll

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J down the streets through those early-winter twilights (the bus back to my village doesn't leave till eight o'clock). How desolate those winter twilights were in those too-broad streets lined by still-vacant lots and whose rare lampposts, ~~and~~ ^{high} and bare, were as somber as gallows and whose lights stared down at you like the eyes of the terminally ill at the end of an immense hospital ward, how enervating was the twilight's glow mingled with those feeble bulbs. Everything tasted false and sinister, like old tea forgotten at the bottom of a teapot. It was the taste of emptiness, because in those days my life was nothing more than cold, week-old, forgotten tea--I, who before had lived and died with thirst and hunger and who now neither lived nor died because I felt no thirst or hunger. I wandered here and there, more lonely and ~~and~~ ^I defeated than a mangy dog, and amid the stale light of those winter dusks I'd occasionally pass a group of poor immigrants from the south of Spain--so many of them had come since the war!--with picks and shovels ~~over~~ ^{on} their shoulders, heading for their shacks among the reeds down by the river. When they spotted my cassock, some of them would nudge the others, run their fingers across their throats, and wink. That's how those poor devils greeted us back then if they ran across us in some dark and deserted spot, and sometimes we'd hear one of them, usually the oldest and most experienced, say "When they lift the ban on priest-hunting . . ." How I would have liked to forget the ocean of hatred that surrounded us, the horrors of so many years, to forget it all and see nothing but the beauty of this world: this world that despite everything, Lord, is Your creation.

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That piercing beauty that penetrates so deep within us on autumn evenings, after a clear day, when the sun begins to set and one begins to glimpse the heavens. I often wandered far from my village on a path between willows, walking till I reached a hill topped by a hermitage with a

big cypress beside it. At dusk that hermitage and cypress are outlined against the sky's vertiginous abyss, and I'd sit down on one of the three steps leading up to the door and abandon myself to a bottomless sadness that was mine but also beauty's: inexplicable melancholy of the universe's beauty. Lachryma rerum. Why do things weep? Why does atrocity laugh? I answered myself: the world's beauty proclaims a Creator, its sadness proclaims His crucifixion, atrocity with its laughter proclaims its cruelty-- but these reflections couldn't dissipate the stupor and discouragement I felt.

Sadness everywhere, sadness in the eyes of animals--those heavy beasts who slowly plodded down lanes at dusk, on their way back to the village; the sadness in those big eyes . . . The angelus bells ~~fell~~ ^{rained down} like stones ^{into} a calm lake and a shudder ran through me because it was I who should have rung them, I who should have been in church at that moment for evening prayers, and it must have been the sexton ringing the bells while I wandered down deserted paths far from the village. The waves of sound, amplified by the mountains, gradually died away and the mules and oxen listened pensively and the tall cypress listened, pensive as an ox, and Lord, ~~in another time~~ ^{once} I'd been capable of love, life, courage; I'd had friends, comrades, hopes and dreams; I'd been happy among them; I'd loved a woman . . . Now You'd withered my heart. You'd made me impotent, barren, sterile; and You knew why. You who make and unmake us.

And that longing for the war, as though I'd only lived then. The bells' resonant waves reminded me of those other ~~waves resounding with~~ ^{the} the boom of distant field guns; ~~that~~ vibration, so similar to the wind in high branches in a pine grove, when one of those big shells passed overhead, inscribing its harmonious ~~parabolic curve~~ ^{parabola} (because we saw them as they reached their peaks and began to slow)--all that came back to me,

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How strong they still seem, those who reach the crest of fifty years, seen from the outside. But termites have already gnawed away the tree's

X core. They're like ceibas, those huge trees I saw in Caribbean ^{the} ~~jungles~~. How strong they seemed. Only an almost imperceptible pallor in their leaves distinguished those with termite colonies ~~within them~~ ^{from} the others. They were like ~~these~~ ^{the} men who came to confession when I was in that industrial town and gave those talks the archbishop banned. They came not so much to confess as to weep. Men you would have thought were in the prime of life . . . like those giant ceibas, which a wind unexpectedly fells because termites have been eating away at them for years and years. The stormy senses, how lovely they seem when one is sixteen and full of hope; how trivial when the termites have completed their hidden task. They wept with weariness, not with remorse. They'd exhausted themselves chasing after a chimera. The flesh is fleeting, always fleeting. No one can catch hold of it, because it's fugacity itself. The ~~inexplicable~~ ^{irrational} wish to eternalize what's fleeting: how it had eaten away at their insides! They came because only in a confessional could they find someone to listen to them, someone who would understand that dark cry of Paradise lost. No other arms will reach out to broken sensualists who, after squeezing their youth dry like a lemon, come to burst into a final tempest of sobs. There are no arms but those nailed in crucifixion.

X I've always felt a secret sympathy ^{with} ~~for~~ these sensualists, perhaps precisely because I'm so unsensual myself. Within a Caribbean jungle's suffocating greenness, one recognizes a chosen tree by the pallor of its foliage. These men also have a dusky, translucent pallor, and all the world's sadness is in their eyes, mirrors of the abyss. Those eyes Soleràs had in his angular, pale face; like two candles beside a deathbed: the glazed eyes of those who don't live but are lived through, those who breathe in life as a flame sucks in air; and what air, the air of storms. They don't live life; it consumes them. Who knows: perhaps I feel such

X sympathy ^{with} for them because I'm so unsensual myself. Their heads never rest on pillows tears have soaked, because they don't seek rest or even pleasure but passion, which is a cross. They flee happiness. They couldn't bear the peaceful warmth of a ² happy home. They flee happiness till one day they feel broken. Then they burst into a final tempest of tears.

X When God's hand squeezes him, woe unto the man who's dry ⁵ flax. Woe unto him who, refusing to surrender, still clings to his defeated banner. How sad is an old man obstinately faithful to his banner now bereft of glory! The God of Mercy will ^{show} ^{to} ~~have~~ none ~~with~~ those who, like Soleràs, refuse not to surrender but to grow old. Those who prefer death to age: Lord, ² ² ~~have~~ pity ~~on~~ their souls! Why did You bring us out of nothingness if everything in us drags us into nothingness? Nothing but Your hand sustains us above the abyss. And from the depths of ages, the echo passes from generation to generation: the dark cry of Paradise lost rises ⁱⁿ ~~to~~ our throats when, leaning over the well of the past, instead of our own faces we see unrecognizable visages.

X And I loved! I loved a woman. I didn't dream it. I know it's true, and nonetheless at times I wonder: is it true that I loved? My heart today scarcely dares to ask my heart yesterday, just as my face today doesn't dare to confront my face tomorrow, reflected in the shadowy mirror at the bottom of the well. I loved, not in a fit of youthful passion but dreaming of white hair and December evenings. How our solitude grows throughout our lives! How our shadows lengthen as the sun sinks in the west! That big cypress is outlined against the sky like the cross against Calvary's sharp-edged horizon. Its shadow lengthens as the sun descends, just as the cross's shadow lengthened. The closer night draws, the longer the cross's shadow; soon it will cover the whole world. The cross is all we can cling to at the edge of nothingness, ^{the} ~~that~~ abyss that sucks us down.

Only in deep night will the cross's shadow cover the entire world.
And the only comforting voice is His, nailed to the cross outlined against
all horizons . . . Music, divine music from the heart's deepest recesses,
resigned melancholy:

Ah, mute not ~~your~~ ^{thy} music, because as on that day

if I close my eyes and listen to ~~your~~ ^{thy} gentle voice,

my sadness melts into melancholy,

my melancholy into peace.

A calm, distant, resigned melancholy in her bright gaze, the timbre of
her voice, her gestures, her silences . . . her mere presence transformed
that sumptuous, impersonal hotel room. She brought her home with her, as
in Santa Espina, as always. Her first visit, if I recall correctly, was two or
three years after my chat with Lamonedá in his garçonnière.

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The very first place she ~~went~~ ^{headed for} was her father's burial niche, in the
upper part of ~~Montjuïc cemetery~~ ^{Montjuïc cemetery}, from which one can see the harbor and
the ~~open sea~~ ^{high seas} beyond it. It's a niche like any other: dark, with no
inscription, lost among tens of thousands. But one recognizes it right away
by the mountain of flowers beneath it, flowers furtively left there and
replaced each Sunday by anonymous hands, hands raw from bleach or
calloused by tools, the hands of humble women and old workers who
haven't forgotten.

X
She went to Mass every evening at ~~St~~ ^{Saint} Philip Neri's Church. Her
white hair was stunning against her black mantilla. She's blessed with
prematurely white hair, which goes so well with true beauty. Is not age
the name of immortal beauty? The gift of being more beautiful with white
hair; she, who was no beauty at twenty, at fifty is peerless. Once she'd
learned that the Fathers of the Oratory had never, even in the worst
moments, stopped preaching in Catalan, and when that had become

X impossible they'd preferred not to preach at all, she never missed evening
Mass at ~~St~~ ^{Saint} Philip Neri's Church. And every Friday ~~she~~ ^J visited Montjuïc ^{CO}
X She lived in that posh hotel as though unaware of the crass luxury ~~of~~ ^J
around her.

X But Lluís . . . Lluís swam through that hotel's air like a big killer
fish in its native sea's warm waters. Often he affected an air of ironic
disillusionment. For example, he'd say, ~~slapping~~ ^{patting} me on the back, "You see
how the manager bows to me? Instead of bowing, he'd kick my behind if
the check I just gave him bounced." But from behind this jaded pose oozed
his real satisfaction, his attachment to this hideous mess we call the
world. Rarely did he speak of his business in Santiago de Chile. When he
X did talk ~~to me~~ ^J about it, he adopted a jocular tone as though he didn't
give a damn, but beneath this frivolous tone one could glimpse a solid
satisfaction with himself. I guessed that he'd let himself be won over by
that threadbare philosophy, worldly cynicism, that makes one lose one's
sense of the supernatural and even of the natural. This delusion had
conquered him, and yet he was good, or more precisely big-hearted.
There's a kind of big-heartedness that characterizes satisfied epicurians,
who think they're happy because their wallets are stuffed with bills. For
example, he told me, in the expansiveness that follows a sumptuous meal,
that he wanted to settle in Catalonia again and found, with part of his
fortune, a school where young workers could learn both specialized skills
X and the principles of the cooperative movement. ~~"I'd like to name this~~ ^{d'm want planning}
institution after my father-in-law," he said, smiling. "It'd be such a
sonorous name: the Milmany Foundation . . . And it'd be the right name
too. He always preached that the only ways to better the working class
were by making it more skilled and organizing cooperatives that really
worked."

X They'd been able to make that first visit, planned and dreamed of for years, thanks to Lluís's ~~North~~^{the} American citizenship (his business had an important branch in Chicago). Before then, those who arrived bearing foreign passports had them torn up at the border. This was beginning to change, and a passport like his was an extremely effective lightning rod now that Spain had diplomatic relations with the United States, previously considered a mortal enemy.

X They came back again, also without Ramonet, in 1959 or 1960. This time they brought their other five children: three boys and two girls. The oldest girl is very pretty, somewhat in the style of El Greco's long-faced Virgins. I asked them why Ramonet hadn't come, and to my great surprise Lluís replied that he'd had to stay in Santiago "and run the business." "You see, Uncle Eusebi died some years ago," he added with a smile. "Now we have to get along without him." What a fool I am. For me, Ramonet was still ~~that~~^{the} kid I'd known in Santa Espina, and I hadn't realized how many years had passed, one after the other, a good twenty! How mixed up I get trying to count the years in my dark tunnel! "How old is Ramonet now: over twenty?" I asked, and Lluís burst out laughing at my puzzled expression. He said he was almost twenty-seven, married, and about to become a father. My God.

X They occupied three very large rooms: what ritzy hotels call a "suite." ~~They~~^{The children} spent most of their time in the parents' room during the day. They even had their meals there. Trini was annoyed--and with reason--by the immense, pretentious dining room, which moreover ~~at suppertime~~^{dress for dinner.} obliged guests to ~~wear evening dress.~~ So they'd asked for a table big enough to seat them all. There she presided, a bit distantly, over family gatherings where one could feel the clan's closeness and ~~that~~^{how} it emanated from her. Once when they were sitting around after lunch and I was

2X having coffee with them, the receptionist entered with a telegram from Ramonet--a telegram about business matters. I'd noticed her at the reception desk where you have to report upon entering that palace. She was one of those girls one sees everywhere nowadays, bursting with fierce and insolent youth. Maybe young people today are so insolent because they sense that once they grow up their lives will be over. She looked about eighteen, the same age as Lluís's daughter who made me think of El Greco's Virgins. While you talked with her at the front desk, she tossed, with automatic gestures like a wind-up toy's, her studiedly dishevelled mane, so blazingly red that it seemed to crackle like a fire. She entered the room while we were having coffee and strode up to Lluís with military arrogance--the arrogance of a general in an operetta--on her spike heels. When her gaze met Lluís's, the look they exchanged was so dense, so conspiratorial, so heavy with unspoken understandings that even an idiot could see what it meant. I suddenly realized that in the eyes of that girl nursed on movies and who'd staked her whole life on one card--her insolent youth--Lluís, with his millions, his graying temples, and his disenchanted, free-and-easy air must have seemed like the perfect specimen of an "attractive older man." But Trini noticed nothing. Gently distant, she devoted all her attention to her children.

X Even now she notices nothing: this miraculously young, seductive grandmother (Ramonet now has two kids). Is it because she doesn't suspect . . . or is it that for her there's nothing in the world except the family she's created: her children and her grandchildren? Does nothing on earth exist for her except her children and grandchildren, for whom she'd sacrifice anything and whom she'd adore even if they were utter simpletons? And what better husband, father, and grandfather than Lluís, who's made a colossal fortune that shields them from life's vicissitudes?

She's clung to her religion: a religion calm and gentle as herself. She believes in it and leans on it. Her missal smells of musk, like her Russian leather gloves, like her mantilla. She believes because she depends on it. Her mantilla, which suits her so well! One evening they invited me to supper. Trini, in my honor, had them turn off the central heating and light a wood fire in that fireplace I'm sure no guest had ever used before. Not long before, Lluís had given her a diamond brooch and a black shawl edged with lace that had belonged to his great-grandmother--the wife of ~~that~~ ^{the} Carlist colonel from 1833. She'd put them on to please him. To make the room feel even more like 1833, she'd had them turn off the electricity and had lit candles. It was the prettiest lace-edged shawl I'd ever seen. With that shawl thrown over her shoulders and that brooch on her bosom, Trini was dazzling. Lluís wracked his brain to give her unusual, unexpected things that would delight her. His idea for the Milmany Foundation was basically another gift. At times he treated his wife as attentively and obsequiously as a foreign ambassador ~~dealing~~ ^g paying court to a queen he must please at all costs. How seductive she was with that old shawl and white hair in the light from the candles and fireplace. Next to her, the poor receptionist was like a Coca Cola ad next to a Rembrandt.

And nonetheless . . . eppur si muove. Lluís brazenly deceived her with that receptionist, just as he's deceiving her now with a manicurist he met God knows where. Trini didn't deign to notice. She followed her own path. Life makes its demands. Her path was the righteous one. Yes, but I loved the rebellious Trini I'd known before a thousand times ~~more~~ ^{better}, the Trini who'd refused to resign herself to her husband's escapades as to a fatalistic religion. I loved that former Trini a thousand times more, because the one I know now, so gently distant and melancholy, so enveloped in the scent of musk and of her Russian gloves, with her

fascinating white hair, is so terribly seductive . . . O, how difficult it is to love a woman who's too seductive!

I forgot to mention, though of course it's understood, that Lluís made his fortune in Santiago manufacturing soup noodles. His factory is the biggest in the entire southern hemisphere. Once Ramonet had recovered, they'd managed to slip out of Olivet de la Virgen, cross the territory ruled by Franco, and catch a plane in Seville that would take them to America where his uncle was waiting for him, thanks to the Baroness of Olivet's influence.

#

Soleràs was of another temperament. He'd never have betrayed his youth, he'd never have knelt before the Lie that rules the world, he'd never have taken that plush hotel seriously, he'd never have manufactured ~~macaroni~~ ^{noodles}. He was a great sinner, but You love sinners of his sort who immolate themselves because they're incapable of betraying their youth. They'd rather go up in flames halfway through their lives than betray it! In Your mercy, won't You forgive them for hastening their own deaths?

Why are these sensualists, who burn with thirst for beauty, so ugly themselves? They're like dry wood, and that's why they burn till there's nothing left, and that's also why death is always before their eyes like a mirror. Because they feel that dizzying fugacity, they burn with a nameless thirst: love, youth, hot and perfumed blood, uncertain glory. Some, like Soleràs, adore this thirst so much that they die of it before they can reach a fountain and drink . . . they flee happiness as though it terrified them. They live not for love but for passion, and they seek not water but thirst. But what do we know about them? Poor me: what could I know? Only You, Lord, can see into their souls. They flaunt their sins and hide their repentance--a devastating repentance only You can see and of which

I have only the vaguest notion from my confessional. You alone, Lord,
know what storms ravage these souls when they can stand no more. You
will forgive him, in Your infinite mercy, for smashing the goblet of life
with which You had blessed him.

But I'd heard nothing specific about Soleràs. I didn't even know if he was dead or alive!

X The only thing I'd gotten straight from Lamonedà's convoluted story was that he'd switched sides again, rejoining the republicans just as the war was about to end. Mightn't he have followed those retreating brigades across the Pyrenees, joined the French ~~maquis~~ ^{Resistance} like so many others, and ended up in Africa, America, Oceania or God knows where? Why not Oceania? We've lost touch with so many of them, scattered throughout the world: in the Philippines, in Madagascar, in Siberia. Or perhaps, like so many others, once the war in France had ended he'd kept fighting with our own maquis and when he couldn't hold out any longer in the mountains he'd hidden in Barcelona, a seething anthill where no one could find him. I knew where some of them were holed up. I'd visited them and helped them out whenever I could. I always asked about Soleràs. No one knew a thing about him. But I never gave up hope. He might reappear when least expected. Wasn't that what Lluís had done after so many years of silence? How overjoyed I'd be if one day he showed up at my mountain rectory! How overjoyed!

There's a bus that goes down to Barcelona early in the morning and returns in the evening. One evening, at the beginning of summer, I was enjoying the cool breeze as I sat on one of the stone benches that flank my rectory on the village's main square. I was watching the children play and the swallows and swifts coming and going from the houses' eaves, listening to their squeals and fluttering wings. This was life, the hot weather that returns every year. Summer was new for those kids and those swallows and swifts. For them, those first hot days were a delightful,

exciting novelty. For me they were just another step in an endless tunnel.

What was I doing in that mountain village? What joy could I expect from

life? I was lost in these sad thoughts when the bus arrived. "It's eight

o'clock; another dying day . . ." And as I thought this I saw him among

the peasants getting off with their bundles and baskets, ~~looking~~ ^{gaping} at him

~~curiously~~ ^{in curiosity} since it's always an event when some outsider visits our village.

But it wasn't Soleràs; it was Lamonedà.

More ghostly than ever, he approached me, and I sat there, stunned,

because in truth I'd never expected to see him in that village. "Here comes

the ghost," I thought. "He's appeared out of nowhere, as always, this

repulsive ghost, after years of not seeing him, when I'd forgotten him

again." He approached me, crossing the square illumined obliquely by the

late-June sunset, which struck him square in his smiling face, but what a

smile, the smile of a worn-out old man. How could Lamonedà have grown

so old?

"They fired me again," I heard him mutter hoarsely. "I'm broke.

~~Vicious~~ ^{Dirty} lies again, the same as always."

I brought him inside because the children had gathered around to

stare at him.

"Oof," he sighed, collapsing in one of the two chairs. "This village

was sure hard to find. At the archbishop's palace they refused to tell me

where you were. Why did you trick me?"--his voice was plaintive--"You

told me you were in Vinebre. Do you know how far away that is? I took a

train. No one had ever heard of you . . . I should have suspected! We're

old pals but you avoid me . . ."

This was at the beginning of the sixties, maybe sixty-two or sixty-

three. Lord knows; I can't remember dates. They're all so similar. How

could I distinguish them in this dark tunnel? And Lamonedà was explaining

how once again he'd been a victim of envy and spite. This time they'd taken advantage of the liberalization to get rid of him. He was broke again . . .

"You're a priest. Don't you know some job I could do?"

"A job for someone who doesn't know how to do anything," I thought. I gathered that he assumed we priests were now running the show. He seemed to blame us for the process of liberalization that had begun four or five years earlier and that for him was a shameful betrayal of principles. He sat in that straw chair, his head ~~hanging down~~ ^{drooping} with weariness, and his bus ticket stuck out of the breast pocket where his handkerchief should have been.

#

And while he recited the litany of his bitter disappointments I stared at that ticket and imagined that in the unexplored depths of his pockets I'd find hundreds of used bus, subway, and streetcar tickets, mute witnesses to his comings and goings in the vast city, trips dead and vanished in the thickening fog of that ghostly life. "Lamoneda's life," I thought dreamily as I gazed at that ticket, "isn't an promenade in a park autumn has carpeted with yellow leaves, disappearing in the distance amid twilit golden mists and divine melancholy. It's an interminable paved street, unspeakably monotonous, carpeted with used bus, subway, and streetcar tickets, disappearing in the distance amid ~~the~~ ² billows from ranks of smokestacks . . ." Lamoneda seemed to carry, divided among the unfathomable depths of his countless pockets, all the bus, subway, and streetcar tickets he'd bought in the course of his life, and I shivered like someone with a fever or at the beginning of winter while he went on reciting the litany of his disappointments. He jumped from one subject to another. He again reproached me for making him think I lived in Vinebre,

but he reproached me without bitterness, almost fondly, as though he found it natural that I'd deceive him. "But why Vinebre, of all places?" he repeated. "Do you know where that is?" No; I didn't know. I had only a very vague, almost mythical idea. It was precisely for this reason that when he'd insisted on getting my address when we left his garçonne, it had occurred to me. It was just the beginning of summer, but that was the first really ~~hot~~ ^{warm} night. I showed him into back garden so we could ~~enjoy~~ ^{sit} ~~the cool air~~ ^{outdoors} beneath the grapevine, and he talked on and on, returning to the subjects he'd discussed in his garçonne as though we'd interrupted our conversation the day before, as though all those years hadn't passed. He even took up where he'd left off that other time, ~~even~~ ^{still} longer ago, in the café on the Ronda de Sant Pau.

"My tenant's gotten rich. He now has two tractors, a threshing machine, a hydraulic press, a pickup truck, and a car. Not only does he live in my house, as usual--there's no way to get the courts to make him move--but he's fixed it up, 'modernized' it, as he says. He's stuccoed the facade because he says the bare stone is low-class; he's walled in that sunny gallery with Gothic arches; he's installed a bathroom for each bedroom. It's not that the pig bathes, but he says it's more modern. There's no way to get him out! I'm the one who has no right to set foot in my own house! I've tried to get back at him every way I can. A waste of time! He's a sly old weasel! During those years when the Civil Guard requisitioned harvests, the peasants who hid them had to sweat. But not mine; that son of a bitch was coining it hand over fist! He sold on the black market just as he had during the war, but now he charged even more! I reported him, not once but many times. The ~~Civil~~ ^{cc} ~~guards~~ would show up without warning, search the house from top to bottom, but they never found the slightest trace of wheat, oil, or hazelnuts! An inscrutable

enigma . . . they found stuff in every house in the village except mine.

X Was he in cahoots with the guards? Were they ~~dividing~~ ^{splitting} the profits? I reported them too. They changed them. An utter waste of time. Only after this liberalization was the mystery finally solved, when there was nothing ~~left to do~~ ^{to be done} because they'd stopped those requisitions. Listen, it's a good story."

X Sitting on a wooden bench beneath the grapevine, he faced away from the garden's back wall, but out of the corner of my eye I spotted that devout old biddy, the one who complained about me time and again to the archbishop once she found out I'd been a "Red priest." That ~~old bag~~ ^{bag} always spies on everyone who enters and leaves my house, everything said and done inside it. On the other side of my garden wall is a lane they call the "lane back of the houses," and there's a pile of rocks, left over from God knows when. I ought to have them carted away. They're just a nuisance, and that old ~~biddy~~ ^{bag} climbs up on top of them, stands on tiptoe, and peeks over my wall. She thought I hadn't seen her, and meanwhile the ghost continued.

X "We haven't had a village priest since the war. Maybe you've heard people talk about the 'lack of vocations.' It's a common subject. There are lots of villages without priests; an appalling lack of vocations. A priest from another village, quite far away, has to come and say Mass. He only comes on Sundays, and not always then ~~either~~ ^{either}. You have to realize my tenant attends Mass more devoutly than anyone for ten miles around. No ~~one's~~ ^{one} voice can bray a 'kyrie' as ~~loud~~ ^{loudly} on holy days. ~~The church shakes~~ ^{He shakes that of} to the rafters! And when he beats his breast, you can hear it resonate. Since, in a word, he's the biggest Jesuit in town, the priest entrusted him with the key. He's been the parish sexton since the forties. Well, our parish church has a crypt where they keep Saint Pandulfa's incorruptible body. I

suppose you've heard of Saint Pandulfa's miraculous mummy? And this wise-assed sexton, I mean my tenant farmer, since the big marble base is hollow ~~inside~~ ^I . . ."

Out of the corner of my eye I spotted the old biddy's marten-like stare. She'd pricked up her ears at that story about saints and relics.

"I'm sure you've caught on by now. He hid the oil under the mummy, in that hollow base. He used it ~~as a~~ ^{for} storage ~~vat~~ ^I! How could the Civil Guard have found it? So my saintly tenant saved his harvest through Saint Pandulfa's intercession! As for the wheat and hazelnuts, he hid them behind the big, baroque altarpiece. No, the Reds didn't burn it. They didn't burn it because the previous tenant, who was the mayor . . . or maybe I already told you that. This was back in the years when wheat, oil, and hazelnuts were worth their weight in gold. He lived high on the hog, while I couldn't afford to eat! Ten thousand pessetes a year, and I was lucky to get ~~that~~ ^{them} . . . When those ministers were just beginning to talk about liberalizing the economy, one day he blurted out in the village café, where he was sitting around with his buddies, 'I liberalized mine years ago without any help from the government.'"

The old biddy didn't miss a word. Her marten's-eyes peered right through us. While Lamonedá went on with his interminable monologue, I thought, with a vague horror that sent chills down my spine, about the possibility that now that he'd found my lair he'd visit me often. Should I request a transfer to another parish to throw that obsessive ghost off my trail if he threatened to turn into my shadow? As darkness fell, his face began to seem like that of a madman, but a very placid madman, what placid insanity. That unquenchable insanity was frightening in its tranquility. And meanwhile, those marten-eyes were still there and the sky gradually turned a deeper and deeper shade of blue and the evening star

had risen above the wall and finally I couldn't resist the urge and said, in my most ceremonious tone, "Good evening, Mrs. Guinarda. Enjoying the cool of the evening up there?"

She suddenly vanished. Lamonedá went on in his monotonous drone, as though he'd heard nothing. "Did you know Remy Mura went bankrupt? You don't know anything about it? It was the talk of the town. Do you realize how many big factories are going to fold? On the other hand, those small manufacturers, the ones who went through hell with inspectors always breathing down their necks, the ones who had to work at night because they'd cut off their electricity during the day . . . they don't mind this liberalization at all. In fact, it's given them a new lease on life. What? Yes, small manufacturers, those busy little bees"--and his voice oozed sarcasm--"the ones who believed in hard work and thrift and the free market, those fucking bourgeois liberals . . . Now they're crowing over their victory! You remember that two-bit shoe manufacturer? He's selling women's shoes by the ton in the United States. Or maybe you don't remember . . . Yes, that one, while Remy Mura and other giants are going ~~to the wall~~ ^{under} . . . these penny ante manufacturers . . . always with their noses to the grindstone, trying to make ends meet! Now these small-time bastards can breathe. They never understood the grandiosity of our proletarian-imperial ~~life style~~ ^{ideals} . . . What? You didn't know Remy Mura had folded? Well, it caused quite a stir! It was the talk of Barcelona! The Marquis of Santas Cruces not long ago had to take a job as manager in one of those ritzy hotels . . . What? You don't know who the Marquis of Santas Cruces is? Mr. Kroitz: don't you remember? Yes, Mr. Kroitz. He's a ~~maitre d'hotel~~ ^{maitre d'hotel} now. Those North American guests drool when they find out the guy bowing to them is a genuine Spanish marquis . . . What pigs those North Americans are! Buying shoes from Freemasons! What's Llibert

Milmany up to now? He's doing just fine! He saw it coming. He knew the jig was up when no one else had the vaguest suspicion. Now he's in Jaén, managing an enormous factory. What could a factory in Jaén possibly make? ~~What do you think:~~ ^{imagine} they extract acids from orujillo; yes, from orujillo. What's orujillo? I don't know; it's something like olive pits. Who owns the factory? Who do you think? Government-owned factories never go bankrupt . . . Two and two make five whenever necessary. That's what their budgets are for. No one ever caught the great Llibert napping! I went to Jaén when I found myself in the street again with no way to make a living, and is it ever far away, especially if you go third class! You can't imagine what an endless trip that was! It's at the other end of the earth! I went to ask if he'd hire me to help him extract acids from orujillo. Of course I don't know a thing about it! But do you think they know more? Do you think there's anyone on earth capable of telling you what the hell orujillo is and what kinds of acids you can extract from it? But Llibert . . . Llibert Milmany . . . the big shot . . . always indispensable . . . ~~Q~~ ^Q what a big shot! What a tightwad! Not only doesn't he want me in his factory, not only does he refuse to split the loot with me fair and square, but he even made some veiled threats that he'd have me rubbed ~~out on the quiet~~ ^{out} if I said anything indiscreet. I'd hinted that I had some clippings, you know: the ones I keep in that Arabian chest in my garçonnière . . . All I could squeeze out of him was a five-hundred pesseta bill, just enough to pay my third-class fare back to Barcelona. And when I started shouting, 'Five hundred! You cheapskate! You stingy bastard!' that gorilla from Medellín appeared and dragged me outside by the scruff of ~~the~~ ^{my} neck. My trip to Jaén was a flop . . . but I . . . I've got the clippings . . . I save everything! They still don't know where my garçonnière is. We could make trouble, kick up a fuss if you felt like it . . . you and I could

..."

"Could do what?"

"Kick up a fuss. Aren't you disillusioned too? There are so many of us. We could kick up a hell of a fuss if we wanted to, with all the practice we've had ..."

It was very late. I invited him to share my supper. I had some potatoes I'd roasted the day before and that I reheated by burying them in the embers in my fireplace. I also had a dry goat-milk cheese of the kind the shepherds around here make, and a loaf of stale bread. I still had a demijohn of the tart, watery wine ~~they grow in this area~~ ^{local to local make} he wolfed down his food. We ate beneath the grapevines, out in the garden, in that cool, dark, late-June night, and while he ate his stale bread and dry ~~goat-milk~~ ^{cheese} cheese, he went on with his monologue.

"That's why I came to visit you. Those of us who are disillusioned should organize ..."

"Didn't you say it was because you thought I could find a job for you?" ^{you}

"Yes, that's what I thought. I thought that since you're a priest ... and in fact, I'm surprised. How come you don't have more pull if you're a priest? There's only one explanation. There must be priests who were deceived too and now feel bitterly disillusioned. We could do big things! Things that would shake the world! We still haven't made that revolution we used to talk about all the time: the revolution of youth, the most glorious one of all! O, what a revolution we could make! I've kept up my contacts, you know, and it's especially because of this that I've come, to make contact with disillusioned priests ... to form a united front, a front of disillusionment ... They've disillusioned the youth of Spain! Yes, they've made fools of us and now that they don't need us anymore they

want to dump us. Well, they've made fools of us long enough! We know the secret. We know how it's done!"

His monologue went on and on, an outpouring of senseless gibberish. It was very late and I brought him to my bedroom, where I laid out another straw mattress. And as I was laying it out, I again felt a chill run down my spine, because it was as though I were reliving something I'd already lived through. When this happens, when we suddenly relive a scene we've lived through many years before, when we make the same gestures

X and
or say the same things we said long ago, when suddenly the past, as though it had laid a trap for us . . . In the dark, where each of us lay on his own mattress, he continued his incoherent monologue and now he was blathering about Malvina Canals i Gonzàlez and I couldn't remember who the devil this Malvina had been. "My wife," he said, and I started. His

wife? Did Lamonedà have a wife? "Don't you remember?" he replied. "That redhead, the one on the Ronda de Sant Pau." It seems this Malvina was driving him crazy. Every time Lamonedà found a job, however temporary it might be, she, who never lost track of him, would show up with a judicial order forcing him to give her a big chunk of his wages. "She won't let me

X live," he said plaintively in the dark. And he explained that he'd ~~tried to~~ ^{taken} ~~take her to court~~ ^{her} divorce her for adultery but she'd called all her lovers as character witnesses, including that altruistic locksmith who'd shared her with the

X others, to swear on the Bible that since Malvina had married her conduct had been irreproachable. Lamonedà had lost the suit, and, to ~~add~~ ^I make matters worse, after reading him the sentence the judge had scornfully asked, "But my good man, who forced you to get involved with a trollop?"

He droned on and on in the darkness, and I felt more and more that someone had played a trick on me, replacing Soleràs with Lamonedà, because that other mattress should have been for Soleràs--as on that night

during the war when he'd shared those surprising confidences with me. And now I was reliving the scene, but with Lamonedà instead of Soleràs, as though some invisible power had amused itself by switching them in my ~~and~~ life. Because I still had the illusion that I could be happy in this life, that I could be happy with a friend who'd keep me company, and this best friend could only be Soleràs. O, if one lucky day I could see him reappear, a defeated failure no doubt, a defeated failure like myself, broken by fatigue; if he showed up unexpectedly one day at my mountain rectory . . . how happily I'd make room for him by my side, how we could comfort each other on this downhill path it's so depressing to tread alone! But some malevolent power had amused itself by putting Lamonedà where Soleràs should have been, and as I remembered Soleràs and that far-off rainy autumn night when each of us lay on his straw mattress, the ghost, jumping from subject to subject, started talking about Soleràs. It was as though he'd taken up where we'd left off in our conversation in his garçonnière, or the other one, even longer ago, in that café on the Ronda de Sant Pau, as though countless years hadn't slipped by, as though we'd been interrupted the day before or as though we'd abolished the time between those talks and the present. And since he was talking about him, I said, "Do you know what became of him? Do you know what happened once he'd joined the republicans or where he is now?"

"How should I know?" Lamonedà replied. "He deserted, disappeared. I never heard from him again. And why would I once he'd joined the Reds? What a jerk! Yes, Soleràs was a jerk, but would you believe he predicted everything that's happening now? 'You'll see your revolution,' he said (because he always said 'your revolution' and 'your comrades' as though he'd never switched sides), 'you'll see your glorious youthful revolution drowned in a sea of holy water.' And he added, 'Everyone'll play you

young people for a bunch of fools.' He said 'you young people' as though he himself were old, but he couldn't have been over twenty-six, while I was well past forty. 'And you'll see what kind of novels foreigners will write about this war! Massive tomes! Pure bullshit, ~~naturally~~ ^{of course}, but it'll sell like hot cakes! If I tried to explain this mess to foreigners, they'd get lost. They can't make head or tail of it! It's not that we understand it much better ourselves, but at least we have a certain idea of its extremely simple complexity. Foreigners don't care for subtlety. They've decided once and for all that Spain must be somewhere down in the tropics, in fact closer to the tropic of Capricorn than the tropic of Cancer, and that without exception, its inhabitants are either bullfighters or ~~Gypsies~~. If you try to suggest that perhaps, in addition to bullfighters and ~~Gypsies~~, one occasionally finds some family man who manufactures socks or shoes or soup noodles, they find it too subtle, too complicated, too unbelievable, and they stop listening because you're giving them a headache. I've lived among foreigners. I know what they're like. For example, they'd explain your story with the Miranda girl after their own fashion. They'd turn you into a ~~Gypsy~~ flamenco bullfighter and her into a big hmm . . .' 'Watch your tongue, Soleràs,' I interrupted. 'She's my fiancée!' 'Foreigners won't give a damn about that. All they care about is making sure the novel sells. I know them, I've lived abroad, I know them like the palm of my hand.' It's amazing how clearly that jerk could see things."

"He was always clear-sighted," I replied. "I wish I knew what became of him once he'd rejoined the Catalan army . . ."

"What became of him? How should I know? You come out with the weirdest stuff . . . Didn't I tell you he was drunk out of his mind the night he deserted? He dragged me along with him. I glanced back at my two men, who were tailing us. I was beginning to get scared. We were too

close to enemy lines! Finally I refused to take another step. We'd reached the other side of the wood, where the fields began. It was then, as we stood among the last ~~pine trees~~ ^{piners,} that he came out with one of his idiotic remarks. 'I don't know, Lamonedà,' he said, 'if you've heard of a certain carpenter.'

"A certain carpenter?"

"Yes, precisely: a certain carpenter.' 'Now you want to talk about carpenters?' 'Why not now? Why shouldn't we talk about carpenters right now?' he replied. 'But what carpenter?' I asked. 'A carpenter like any other, a village carpenter who's got me very worried.' 'Why should you worry about some village carpenter . . .' 'Yes, a carpenter in a village, in a real one-horse town, a kind of Olivel de la Virgen.' 'Listen: this is no time to jabber about carpenters . . .' and I looked around, because I could see he was stark raving mad. My two men were hiding behind some bushes, keeping us in sight. 'A poor carpenter in a dumpy hick town: a certain Jesus. I don't know if you've heard of him.' 'Now Jesus?' 'Why not now? Why not now, you son of a bitch? Who do you expect me to talk about at a time like this, if not Jesus? ~~Who~~ ^{Whom} should I think of, if not Him? Himmler, you son of a bitch?' 'Don't call me a son of a bitch again, Soleràs. I won't stand for it.' 'I assure you that this carpenter's got me worried, a carpenter in a lousy one-horse town. Without Him, what sense would anything make?' 'You're the one who doesn't any make sense,' I said. 'You don't know what you're ~~saying~~ ^{talking about}. You're raving!' 'I'm not raving as much as you think, Lamonedà. I know very well what I'm ~~saying~~ ^{talking about} right now. Without this village carpenter, what an ~~incomprehensible~~ ^{a meaningless} practical joke life would be! Do you think we should believe in you more than in Jesus of Nazareth? Should we read your novels instead of the Bible? Please! If I have to choose between you and Him, I'll take Him. Mary

Magdalene knew men; she was no fool! She knew men and stuck with Him, not with Stendhal.' 'Don't make me laugh,' I said. 'Do you think Stendhal lived in Jerusalem in Mary Magdalene's time?' 'Everything's possible,' he replied. 'You won't find many with as much experience as Mary Magdalene, and she stuck with Him! It's absurd to tell a pig like you who won't understand, but I'm dying to tell you. I'll burst if I don't!' 'What do you want to tell me?' 'Ever since I was twelve, I haven't been able to read about Mary Magdalene in the ^{Bible} Gospels without my eyes filling with tears.' And suddenly he started yelling up at the stars, 'Mary Magdalene, whore and martyr, do not forsake me!' ^{He} That nut shouted so loud that the Reds finally heard us and let us have a couple of rounds of machine-gun fire. Luckily they could hear but not see us, because it was a dark night and we were standing among the last trees in that pine grove. Beyond it, a flat, treeless plain stretched right up to the enemy lines. By the starlight, we could make out the sacks of earth they'd piled up as parapets in the distance, on a little hill. Soleràs was gripping my arm again and trying to drag me along with him, but I was struggling to get away. 'And now,' he said as I fought to break loose from his hand gripping my arm like a vise, 'I'm going to desert right in front of your nose, knowing perfectly well who you are and what your game is. I'm going to desert because I feel like it and because I've always, ever since the tender age of twelve, done exactly what I felt like in front of ~~everyone's~~ ^{people's} noses.' It was then that I finally broke free and pushed him away. Then . . . that's all I know. He left; I lost sight of him! He headed for those parapets, and I haven't heard from him since. Why are you so interested in that jerk Soleràs? After all, you hardly knew him and he was nothing but a fool!"

"You say you lost sight of him, but the terrain in front of you was flat and treeless all the way to the enemy lines . . . the moon was out, I

remember you said that day at your garçonnière . . ."

"The moon? No; I can assure you there was no moon. It was a very dark night; no moonlight. The ground dipped. Don't ask me anything else! All I know is he vanished. He was a jerk and deserted . . . I'm in no mood for this nonsense. Don't ask me anything else! I'm fed up with him! I don't give a shit about all the Soleràses who ever lived and ever will live . . . Didn't I tell you what he did to Captain Ibrahim? What could you expect from an asshole like him? The hell with Soleràs. It's boring to talk about him. Let me recite some choice excerpts from my novel, my masterpiece, the synthesis of them all. My life's crowning achievement . . . Our immortal struggle's epic poem! I know whole chapters by heart."

And without transition, he began reciting, in that dark bedroom, tedious tirades involving some duchess named Atalanta and an ambassador named Recesvinto from God knows which empire. It was stupefyingly dull! Luckily he soon dropped off to sleep and from then on I heard nothing but his deep, resonant snoring. At daybreak I took him to the bus stop and paid for his ticket after telling him I'd prefer ~~not to~~ never see him again.

Cui prodest?

And in fact, I didn't see him for some years.

One evening in autumn 1968, after returning from Barcelona, where I'd spent the day with Lluís and Trini, I started sweeping out my church. Because it was Friday, the day I always sweep it. The church is as bare as the one in Santa Espina. Everything in it was scrupulously burnt in 1936 by the anarchist flying patrols, who left only the stone altar standing. After the war, the villagers provisionally nailed a big cross made from two pine trunks from which they'd barely stripped the bark, without any image, to the wall behind that altar. As I've said, this was supposed to be temporary while they replaced the burnt altarpiece. Years have passed--almost thirty--and nothing's changed. I love that rough-hewn cross, which is more fitting than any man-made image could ever be.

So I was sweeping out the church that Friday evening. The only light came from a little wick in a lantern I'd hung outside the sacristy, and the dust my broom raised from the flagstones smelled like fresh earth in a newly dug ^{grave} ~~tomb~~, like Good Friday. It was autumn of 1968. How monotonously the years had slipped by, how much they resembled each other in my dark, endless tunnel. In the meantime ~~my~~ ^{JA} aunt Lluïcia had lain on her deathbed for months and months before finally dying--in sixty-four, sixty-five, maybe sixty-six?--so now I was even more alone in the world. Each step we take is another step toward aloneness. I swept and daydreamed while a chilly breeze, sneaking through a crack in that door that didn't shut tight, made the flame flicker ~~from side to side~~ ^{side to side} like a pendulum. It flickered very gently, while I went on sweeping and daydreaming.

Suddenly, on the altar, I saw that piece of paper.

How could someone have gotten into the church and left a piece of paper on the altar? The church is locked from morning Mass till evening prayers. That sheet of paper was there, clearly visible on the tabernacle. A stone held it down ^{to keep} ~~so~~ the wind ^{from blowing} ~~wouldn't blow~~ it away. I read it by the light from the lantern: "Bring me something to eat. They've got me cornered. Soleràs."

A crude map of the way to his hideout filled the rest of the page.

After thirty years, how could I believe he was still alive? I must admit that my first reaction was ^b ~~skepticism~~. How could it be him? But if it wasn't him, who could it be? No one in that village knew anything about Soleràs or about our friendship thirty years ago. And no outsiders had been seen in town the last few days. What if it really was him? Could he have lived all those years abroad without ever getting in touch with me? Or had he been hiding out in the woods with the maquis and later holed up in Barcelona? I knew ~~of~~ ^I others who had fought in the French Resistance and once the Second World War was over had crossed the border again and gone on fighting in the Pyrenees. In 1948 there were still a few left, not many, who hadn't lain down their arms and lived like hunted wolves in Catalonia's most rugged, out-of-the-way ravines and gorges. Later, when even this became impossible, they'd vanished into Barcelona ~~as~~ ^I ~~seething~~ anthill. I knew some of them and had helped them out at times. Could he have been one of them? What if it was him, trapped like a hunted wolf in the forest without a hope on earth but me?

I knew where the place on the map was. I'd often visited it during my solitary strolls. It's a big ravine, far from any settlement, with a paper mill that's now in ruins. In springtime, hundreds of pairs of crows nest in crevices in the high cliffs. You can see them coming and going, busily

X *J* bringing food to their young *ones*, and their raucous caws, ~~amplified by~~ *echoing* the stone, enliven that shadowy solitude for a few months. But once summer ends, the spot becomes more and more silent, and from the beginning of December on, no ray of sunlight penetrates that deep, narrow gorge with its stream.

I set out at night. I walked for five hours, filled with an insane hope: maybe it was Soleràs! What if it really was Soleràs, what if it really was him? What if in my deepening solitude, God had sent me that resurrected friend? How happy we could be together in the twilight of our lives! What good company we could be!

X Day was just breaking when I reached Mill Gorge, which is what people ~~in these parts~~ *around here* call that spot. How many plans I'd dreamed up as I walked along, first beneath the stars and then by the light of the waning moon. Soleràs and I could live together for the rest of our lives. Defeated failures in this world, why couldn't we live together in hope of the next? Because if it was really him, if it was him, he'd be at least as alone as I was, at least as much of a defeated failure, at least as lost in that dark, endless tunnel, at least as neurotic. We could live together in my rectory. Who knows: maybe he'd decide to become a priest. And if he preferred not to, if for whatever reason he didn't want to take orders, couldn't he live with me as a lay brother, a much more intelligent and learned brother than the clergy? Isn't that what they used to do? Didn't Christians equally desirous of peace and solitude establish brotherhoods? Isn't history full of hermits and anchorites? Isn't it precisely in our century that we most feel the need for peace and solitude, after all the horrors we've had to witness? But Lord--I thought to myself--is solitude bearable without company? Solitude with a brother, Lord: give me that and I'll never ask for anything else in this life.

Day was just breaking when I saw him in the distance. He was sitting on a boulder by that brook, with his back to me. It was his back. It was really and truly his back! The same back he'd always had, bent and bony as that of an old, beaten workhorse, and trembling at the sight of that resuscitated friend, I approached him, but he didn't turn around despite all the noise my hobnailed boots made on the stones along the bank. I could make out his skinny neck, his locks of badly-cut hair. He was very shabbily dressed, warming himself by a fire he'd built. It was the crackling of that green, damp wood that kept him from hearing my footsteps: the crackling wood and the rushing stream. Suddenly he heard me and whirled around and I saw his yellowed, lined face like a mummy's, with its stubbly, almost-white beard, and his eyes--those sad, crafty eyes.

I couldn't keep from shouting in disappointment, "Lamonedà!"

#

X While ^{he} ~~he~~ devoured the loaf of bread I'd brought him, I saw a cross a few steps from us, held in place by a pile of stones from the stream.

It was made of two rusty iron bars, crudely lashed together with a piece of old rope. Upstream, almost hidden among the brambles, was the charcoal burners' hut I later found out he'd chosen ^{for} ~~for~~ his home. At the sight of that cross, I started whimpering, and I'll be hanged if I know why. He put down his bread and looked at me suspiciously, "You're crying? Over what, if I may ask? Are you going to turn me in? The whole thing's so ridiculous!"

"Turn you in?"

Turn him in? To whom? And for what? What did he mean? We could still see the waning moon, waxy yellow between the blue and the rosy dawn. He pointed to it and said, "It looks just like a face, but eaten away, as though they'd gnawed through half of it. It looks like it's spying on me

too . . . " He went back to his bread, and we sat in silence for a while as he wolfed it down and I watched him.

"You won't rat on me," he finally said. "That's why I've come to hide beneath your cassock. It was the only way out. I couldn't sneak across the Pyrenees. They're watching all the passes. I'll have to be patient and wait till they get tired of looking for me. Admit it: if I hadn't signed Soleràs's name, if I'd written Lamonedà instead, you wouldn't have come. I'm not one of your favorites. You made that clear the last time we saw each other. So much the better; they'll never think of looking for me here. It'll never occur to them! I've thrown them off the track for a while, provided you don't turn me in. You won't do that. You couldn't, and besides . . . you loved my uncle so much!"

Painful ^{brightened} terrified looks flitted across his face from time to time. He suddenly stopped talking to listen to the wind swaying the top branches on the pines, a sound so similar to those big shells whistling overhead during the war. Suddenly he turned pale, as though he were about to faint. We heard sounds behind us, like someone stealthily approaching.

It was only a squirrel: a big, handsome red squirrel who fled in terror when it realized we were watching it, scattering half-rotten pine cones. I couldn't make head or tail of what he was saying: he held the key to a mystery and that's why they were after him, but who? Who was after him? What mystery? What key?

"And what's this cross for?" I asked, feeling genuinely intrigued. There it was, that unexpected cross. There ^{it} was. I wasn't seeing things. He looked at me as though he hadn't understood my question. "This cross?" he repeated. Then he suddenly stammered, "I found those two bars in that ruined mill downstream, and they gave me an idea. If some shepherd or hunter comes by, I'll have to explain what I'm doing in this

ravine, right? I'll have to tell him something: some cock-and-bull story about penance, solitude, anchorites. Some people go for that sort of pious drivel. I even feel up to performing miracles. Why not? Like my uncle . . . Why not? It's not as hard as it sounds . . ."

He chuckled and glanced at me out of the corner of his eye.

"My uncle! What would you say if I told you he wasn't really my uncle?"

#

He stirred the ashes, repeating under his breath, "I can't kid you. We've known each other too long."

X The fire had finally caught, and I thought how odd it all was. He blew on the flames, bringing his face too close to them, and I caught the charred smell, like burnt wool, of his hair. As he puffing, he glanced at me out of the corner of his eye.

X "What if I told you he wasn't really my uncle . . . after all, we've known each other too long to pretend. I'll tell you why I'm hiding. I bared my teeth the last time. I've still got my trump and they don't know where. They haven't found my garçonnière. But ~~my timing was bad~~ ^{red} ~~overshadowed it.~~ All I wanted was a little dough. With five hundred thousand I could have gotten by and kept Malvina quiet. They didn't understand. They must have thought I wanted more and taken my threats seriously. They've decided to get rid of me."

He thought his life was in danger, but I thought he was suffering from acute paranoia. I asked why he'd lit that fire. Amazed, he said he hadn't realized the smoke could be seen from so far away.

#

Every week, always at night, I'd take him food. As winter drew on, he seemed to sink into sloth like an animal getting ready to hibernate. I

X found him always curled up at the far end of his hut on a pile of rotten straw. He always wore the same underwear. He didn't have a change. I couldn't get any for him because I'd have had to ask for it and that would have attracted attention. Not long before, my parishoners had given me a couple of shirts, the only ones I had since I'd thrown away the old ones. Finally he stopped washing, even though the brook was only a few steps from his hut. As far as socks were concerned, he threw them away. His sweat had rotted them, and from then on he just wore shoes over his bare feet. His shoes stank to high Heaven but were almost new since he never walked anywhere.

Sometimes, when I arrived after dark, I'd surprise him reading by the light from a little wick I'd brought him. As soon as he caught sight of me, he'd hide his thick manuscript in the straw. It was--he finally confessed--his masterpiece, his crowning achievement. "The worst thing would be if I ~~lo~~ lost this manuscript." When the first frosts began to appear and night fell at four PM or even earlier and everything was eternal shade in the depths of that gorge, the idea of slipping across the border began to obsess him again. He was sure that in Paris he'd find what he'd never had in Barcelona: a publisher. To make the trip, he'd have needed underwear, socks, a decent suit, a good overcoat, and money. I could cut his hair and lend him my razor; at least that much was possible. But the rest? How could I buy him suits, underwear, socks? I was flat broke and so was he.

#

He revolted me more and more, and nonetheless I brought him bread and potatoes every week: potatoes I'd already roasted in my fireplace so he wouldn't have to light a fire to cook them. He revolted me more and more, but nonetheless I kept going. I couldn't just abandon him to his misery and lunacy. And each time I asked myself fearfully why his face

made me want so much to . . . yes, to erase it as one erases a bad sketch and starts over again, but this time drawing Soleràs's face. Because someone had played a trick on me, putting Lamonedà where Soleràs should have been. Lamonedà was nothing more than a vile caricature of Soleràs! What a vile caricature! A face that ugly had no right to exist! He was an antiman! My revulsion grew by the week, not so much because of that fat manuscript crammed with pretentious monstrosities or the key to that mystery, which I finally figured out. O no. I'd have been just as nauseated in any case because Lamonedà was an anti-Soleràs, an antiman . . . He was Cain! He had no right to be so ugly! Why, why did that man, so hideously ugly, cling to my life like a leech? Why had he turned into my inseparable ghost? Why, in this world, far from those we'd like to be close to, must we put up with someone we'd like to be light-years away from?

There's no point fooling myself. For the rest of my life, I'll have to live with the knowledge, the knowledge that I started feeling the urge to erase that unbearable caricature before I realized what the key to the mystery was, before he'd begun reading me passages from his manuscript. I'll have to live with the fact that the urge came over me before that, born of my revulsion at his face, and that I would have felt it without all the rest. I'll have to live with that if I want to see myself as I really am.

X There's a murderer crouching, ~~hiding~~ ^{hidden} deep inside me.

Especially on that night. The evening before, I'd had supper with Lluís and Trini in their suite, and the next day I had to bring him bread and potatoes. I never let him down, fooling myself with that old excuse: Christian charity. "I can't just abandon him to his misery and lunacy" I thought. But in fact, that vile caricature of Soleràs attracted me more and more. The more he revolted me, the more he attracted me. O, how he attracted me, the way certain sluts attract men who are chaste or ought

X to be, and in my self-deception I made the same excuse a chaste man who consorts with a slut usually offers: that I was trying to ~~convert~~ ^{reform} him. I closed my eyes to what I felt, saying I wanted to save him when in fact what I wanted was just the opposite. When the brook froze over, he stopped venturing out of his lair, which stank like an old fox's burrow. The night before I'd been eating with Lluís and Trini in their suite, and now here I was, face to face with that antiman at the hour when the black night sky starts turning bluish. It was freezing outside his hut. The two of us were together, immersed in its warm fox-stench, and through a gaping hole I could see that rusty iron cross. I could hear his droning voice in the darkness as he recited long passages from his novel by heart, and this was the night after my supper in that ritzy hotel, where I'd seen Trini wearing her lace-edged shawl and that diamond brooch, fascinating with her white hair by candlelight and firelight. And before having supper with them I'd visited my old archbishop, who's now dead. I visited him more and more because the poor man, half paralyzed by his stroke and in despair since they'd forced him to retire and he was no longer our archbishop, needed my company so badly . . . I'd gone to see him and wept in his arms, as I did every time I saw him: so old, so helpless, so devastated by the thought that he no longer was our archbishop. I'd wept as I wept every time I saw our old archbishop, so good, so simple, so incredibly stupid and thick-skulled, and here I was, in that dark lair, listening to his tedious voice with its litany of incomprehensible monstrosities: incomprehensible to me, who nonetheless at one time had heard the most atrocious things in my confessional! How monotonous, boring, and stupefying that story was about an older duchess and a sex-starved marquise, aristocrats of the snootiest sort, and I thought of Trini and my old archbishop. The hero, a young secret agent from whom

Himmler expected great things and who in fact was rising fast in the imperial diplomatic service, was irresistible in their eyes. Hopelessly in love, they could refuse him nothing. I got lost amid such tangled monstrosities (and yet I'd heard the most shocking things in my confessional), and, dazed by his droning voice, I began thinking about another story he'd told me one night about his real father. He'd finally told me that Doctor Gallifa hadn't been his uncle, but in fact he had been, however much Lamonedas tried to confuse the issue. He'd been his uncle since he'd been his mother's brother, so that unexpected discovery hadn't changed anything. When I made this remark, when I tried to get him to see that, despite everything, Doctor Gallifa was really and truly his maternal uncle, he shrugged his shoulders. "I don't give a damn about my family," he replied.

It was his tenant who'd told him the truth, unknown to everyone until then. Everyone but Doctor Gallifa. It's quite understandable that he should have kept quiet. His sister was involved, but even if she hadn't been, Christian charity would have impelled him to keep the secret. The surprising part wasn't his uncle's silence but that no one had suspected a thing until the tenant had stumbled across it, a completely accidental discovery that never would have occurred were it not for his incessant "improvements" on the Lamonedas' ancestral home, which was now his by virtue of the lease in perpetuity he'd signed with Lamonedas' father. The last time Lamonedas had gone to collect his annual ten thousand pessetes--almost a year earlier--he'd insulted the man, as was his custom. "You're nothing but a crook. You stole my house and my lands." He'd insulted him in similar terms many times before, once a year at least. The tenant had always simply shrugged his shoulders and chortled. The novelty this last time was that the tenant had calmly and mockingly replied, "You're no

more Lamonedá's son than I am."

"You're no more Lamonedá's son than I am," the tenant had said with a sarcastic leer. And without giving it to him, he'd shown him a bundle of yellowed letters.

He'd found those letters, tied in a bundle with red thread, by chance, though it wasn't so odd when one remembers that he'd been constantly working on the house for thirty years, ever since he'd settled in at the end of the war. It would have been odder if he hadn't found them, since they were simply stuffed in a crack between two stones in an attic wall. He'd decided to turn that attic into a modern henhouse and hired a bricklayer to cement the cracks in the rough stone walls. The man had found that bundle and given it to him. According to Lamonedá, a rumor then started that the workman had found a copper chocolate pot full of old gold coins. It had appeared, the villagers said, when the man had ripped out the stone lintel above a door that opened onto "heaven"--which is what they call the little room up by the attic where they keep their best old wine, while "hell" is what they call the basement where they'd previously had an oil mill and the tenant now kept his hydraulic press. Lamonedá ~~had~~ ^{the} had his doubts about ~~this~~ ^{the} chocolate pot full of gold. "The only chocolate pot," he growled sarcastically, "was that bundle of letters. It's amazing how women can't resist the temptation to keep them."

His mother had died very young in an accident shortly after he'd been born. She'd gone to fetch some wine one evening, not in "heaven" but in the wine cellar in the basement, near "hell," because as she'd set the table for supper she'd noticed that the demijohn in the kitchen was empty. She'd fallen in one of the wine presses whose trapdoor the hired hand had forgotten to shut. This was in November, the press was full of fermenting must, and she'd died instantly, suffocated by the carbon

dioxide. Lamonedá had learned these details of his mother's death from his father, "That's all he ever told me about her. Apart from telling me how she'd died, he never mentioned her. But it's odd that she went down in person to fill that demijohn when they had servants. It's pretty weird too that the trapdoor on the press was open . . ."

X she ^{must have} considered a temporary hiding place. She must have thought she'd find a better one later on. How could she have suspected that she'd die so young? Perhaps, if she'd lived, one day she'd have decided to burn them. The fact is that there they were, stuck between two stones in the attic wall, and there they'd stayed unbeknown to anyone for over seventy years. Because those seventy and some odd years were Lamonedá's age. Hadn't more than a quarter of a century passed since our talk in that café, when he'd told me he'd just turned fifty with nothing to show for it. During all those years that bundle of letters had stayed there, yellowing, till one day--sooner or later everything will out--the bricklayer had found it and taken it to the tenant. "My poor mother had saved them, like Madame Bovary, ~~like Natalia Vasilievna~~, like all of them! They can't help it; they can't bring themselves to burn them . . ."

#

2X Once that unexpected discovery had put Lamonedá's tenant on the right track, he'd made some discreet inquiries. In a nearby village lived a man, almost a hundred years old, who was teething again as sometimes happens in old age. This venerable ^{elder} ~~ancient~~ vaguely ^{recalled} ~~remembered~~ that the wedding had taken place in Barcelona, contrary to those landed families' immemorial custom of marrying their children in the village where the bride has her family seat. The newlyweds weren't seen, either in his

village or hers, for two years. When they did appear, they had a child with them who looked over two. "You could see that at a glance, and at the time," the venerable elder who was teething again had said, "people around here thought they must have jumped the gun. But since after all, that's not unusual and it doesn't make any difference, people got sick of gossiping about it." "Is that all the gossip there was about them?" In truth, the old man couldn't remember anything else. They didn't know the bride very well in his village. She was from a distinguished family, but one that lived some miles away, and besides, she'd been mostly in Barcelona until then. "She was a younger daughter from a good family near Vic," he'd said, "and she brought the Lamonedas a good dowry. That's about all anyone knew." The tenant wasn't satisfied with this vague, rather naive story. He wrote to Barcelona, asking for copies of the marriage and baptismal certificates, and thus was able to prove that the child had been baptized before the parents' wedding. But altogether it wouldn't have amounted to much without that bundle of yellowed letters.

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Often Lamonedas interrupted this tale because entire passages of his novel came into his memory. He didn't tell me everything I've just recounted coherently and in order but mixed up with bizarre declamations uttered by Duchess Atalanta and Ambassador Recesvinto. From week to week, as the cold grew more bitter in that shadowy gorge, his madness grew more acute. By the end he seemed like a machine, so automatically would he drop one subject and take up another. And what interminable, boring litanies those passages from his novel were! His style, which he thought had surpassed Eugeni d'Ors's and indeed was reminiscent of his at times, was crammed with the most farfetched metaphors. Trains always snaked toward their destinations. Snow-covered cities always looked like

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immense consecrated wafers. The plot was Sodom and Lesbos, Sade and Masoch (without leaving out old Onan either), incest and rape, bestiality and sacrilege, all inextricably tied up with morphine and cocaine. It was impossible to form the remotest idea of what Count Recesvinto, Duchess Atalanta, Marquise Brunhilda and other characters of both sexes or of undetermined sex were doing. They'd enter and exit, enter and exit, as numerous and tedious as names in a phone book, but a phone book that admitted only the upper crust and the most brilliant and clever diplomats. "Madam, this is what we in high society are like," Recesvinto remarked on one occasion. And on another, Duchess Atalanta commented: "Richelieu was a babe in arms compared to you, Recesvinto. Thanks to you, the sun will never set on our empire ~~again~~ ²." His droning voice went on reciting entire chapters, while I imagined Trini in her shawl by the light from those candles and the fire. I imagined her white hair, her bright, soft, melancholy eyes so full of distant dreams, and he never paused for an instant in his endless litany of monstrosities, while I felt the urge grow by the minute to erase that ugly face. O, a face that ugly had no right to exist! Lamonedá had gone too far!

One night, instead of reciting from his novel, he made plans. He often was seized by this mood and started daydreaming aloud. "Those scum will need me again. They can't get along without me." He'd spoken to me several times, in very nebulous terms, about a "new prior catastrophe." That night he spoke of it again, and how ugly his almost-eighty-year-old monkey's face was in the first pale, icy light of that December dawn. And that rusty iron cross was there, those two iron bars were there tied together with a piece of half-rotten rope, outlined against the vague light outside. And I thought of Soleràs, whose unbearable caricature that monkey was; of Soleràs, who was dry wood, quick to burn, but his

caricature was nothing but rot that crumbles when you touch it, and my discomfort grew more intense. I had to wipe him off the face of the earth: that obscene caricature of Soleràs!

I felt drops of sweat trickle down my spine as he spewed out plans and more plans. That surprising idea had finally appeared in my head. I could feel it lodged there like a migraine, but at that moment the machine brusquely shifted gears and now he was reciting from his novel again: "The duchess, whose virtues were held up as an example to young ladies, in her private life stopped at nothing. She had learned to mix murder and caprice . . ." He recited and I sweated with agony. He droned on and on; I wasn't even listening to him. I didn't notice that he'd stopped talking till, after a silence, his voice asked in a supplicating tone, "If something bad happened to me, would you see to it? Promise me!"

"See to what?"

"Why . . ."--he looked at me in amazement--"that you'd try and get it published!"

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One day, among the characters in his novel, a new one appeared: one I knew only too well. What I hadn't realized was that he'd known him too. "We were in touch even before the war," he said. And seeing my surprise, he added, "Why should that shock you? It was all hush-hush. He didn't want anyone to know and neither did we. You never suspected? Well, that was the idea! We agreed that after the prior catastrophe we'd have the cardinal declared insane and he'd replace him. He was counting on it. He could already see himself in a cardinal's hat, dressed in crimson. He'd sworn to renounce his primacy ab aeternum for himself and all his successors. But he'd forgotten one small detail: the pope."

"The pope?"

"He didn't want anything to do with what we'd worked out. He wouldn't even hear of incapacitating the cardinal. Quite the opposite: when he had to go into exile, he welcomed him to Rome with open arms. That pope died, but his successor wasn't any better. If I sometimes suspected that Pius XI was a Freemason, I've sometimes suspected that Pius XII was not only a Freemason but a Jew."

"Anything's possible," I muttered. "We know for a fact that the first pope was."

"You know who dreamed up that sublime phrase: 'The youngest of all revolutions is the revolution of the young'? Well, it was him, your relative: Monsignor Pinell de Bray. If only for this phrase, he deserved a cardinal's hat. But it was not to be. The pope didn't want anything to do with what we'd planned. Exiled or not, the cardinal was still our cardinal. When he died, Monsignor Pinell de Bray got his hopes up again. In vain! For years the pope refused to nominate anyone to fill the vacancy, and finally he appointed someone else. Your relative never recovered from this bitter disappointment. That's what led him to his grave."

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In fact, Monsignor Pinell de Bray had died many years earlier. In 1950, 1952, 1954? How can I remember, how can I distinguish one year from another in this procession of identical years? I'd forgotten all about him till Lamonedá reminded me.

My aunt had died many years after her cousin. Her final illness had been horribly drawn out, since the poor nephew she'd made her heir had felt obliged to spare no expense to prolong her life. A doctor, ~~his~~ ^{the two} assistant ~~and two~~ nurses were always at her bedside, ready to give her an injection like someone injecting a drop of oil into a lamp that's about to go out. This dreadful agony, artificially prolonged, lasted for months and

months. I visited her several times. Usually she showed no sign of recognizing me, but on one occasion she started ranting about Pope John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council, which was taking place at that time, with such ~~fiere~~ ^{ferocious} bitterness that my hair stood on end. How could a dying octogenarian, who only survived thanks to injections, keep up with the council's session and even find the strength ~~in her exhausted body~~ to talk about them so caustically. "You and other wicked priests like you have destroyed the Church!" she repeated a few days before her death in one of her lucid moments. She spat the words out so viciously that I even feared she'd lost her faith. Almighty God, pity her and all us sinners, amen.

So now Lamonedá reminded me of Monsignor Pinell de Bray, whom I'd completely forgotten. But how could I recognize my aunt's cousin, whom I'd had so much to do with at one time, in the incredible character he'd turned into in that novel? His amethyst ring was mixed up with the ~~elaborate~~ ^{elaborate} duchess's black silk stockings--those black stockings came up over and over again like an obsession--and with the Byzantine intrigues of the sex-starved marquise and the young count, "who in fact ended up being one of the leading lights in the imperial diplomatic service." He tirelessly recited endless passages, in what he called "rhythmic prose," where everything got as tangled as a ball of yarn a cat's been playing with: "The monsignor pretends to have forgotten how much he owes me. Atalanta, however, is grateful. She knows they owe me everything, not like the ungrateful monsignor who pretends he's never met me. But I'm no clergyman! Struggle and high diplomacy are in my blood. I need storms to breathe deeply! By God, I'm no priest!" Since a city he'd written about earlier reappeared, covered in snow again, this second Eugeni d'Ors felt called upon to write: "Years before I'd found it covered with snow like a huge Communion

wafer. Now the snow was even deeper, like two wafers at least." But then he immediately went back to those black stockings. I'm not sure exactly what he had in mind, what kind of stockings obsessed him so--but it was an almost sorrowful obsession. His voice caught in his throat every time he mentioned them. In the stinking darkness of his lair, at the bottom of that steep, narrow gorge where everything had been frozen for days, I sometimes felt lost as in a cave from whose stony vaults thousands of black stockings hung like clusters of sleeping bats or like dark, translucent cobwebs that crumbled at the touch.

X Sometimes, as in a flash of lightning, amid that enormous mess I thought I glimpsed a kind of ~~an~~ ²ambiguous, vaguely outlined form, yet what a solid, heavy, enormous trunk it was among all that junk covered with dust and cobwebs. He barely realized, but he mingled words and whole sentences with his tales of marquises and duchesses that were like sudden flashes in a dark cave, illuminating that unexpected bulk. He barely realized and I barely understood. How hard it was to understand, and nonetheless that huge trunk was there. His incoherent jabber was laced with bloodcurdling details about what had happened that night inside the Carmelite monastery. Why did it take me so long to catch on? I'd been stupefied by so many horrors; because horrors stupefy and I myself was already numb.

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In that asphyxiating silence, a rumor at times arose like an almost imperceptible breeze that barely stirs the blades of grass. News--some of it unbelievable--reached us like a whiffs of some far-off aroma brought by an almost imperceptible breeze. What unbelievable rumors that silence engendered, what ghosts the dark tunnel bred. One evening I was wandering, as I still often did, down the avenue flanked by vacant lots on

the outskirts of that industrial town. How deeply we can come to love the places where we've been unhappy, how tenuous and sad the twilight was on that long, gloomy, muddy avenue. I wandered at random, as I still did at that time, in the fifties, when I had to visit Barcelona. Once, during that decade, seven or eight kids ran up to me and kissed my hand, overjoyed to see me again after five or six or God knows how many years. They were eleven or twelve years old, and earlier, when they'd been six or seven, they'd attended my classes in the shacks in their neighborhood. They recognized me but it was hard for me to recognize them, so much had they changed, and then they told me that unbelievable story.

How could anyone be capable of that? Could someone have stolen a child's eyes without some voice crying out to Heaven? But is it not appalling that all ~~these~~ ^{those} people believe it? Because everyone believes that unbelievable story: everyone, young and old, in that shantytown.

He'd disappeared from his shack. He was a boy, the third in one of the poorest families. A family that had twelve or thirteen or fourteen children and lived in the lowest part, right in the dry river bed. The river, dry most of the year, can suddenly rise and almost every September floods the shacks. The people who live there are so used to it that they take it in stride. The neighbors realized he wasn't around because he was a very noisy, playful kid of eight and couldn't have passed unnoticed. When they started asking questions, his parents replied that they'd informed the "mayor," not the official mayor but the "neighborhood mayor," who ran a tavern on the corner. They also said he must have run away because he was scared, as he'd done once before when he'd broken a ~~clay~~ ^{gl} casserole while he was playing, that he'd come back on his own as he had the other time when he'd gotten cold and hungry.

They didn't see him again until one rainy dawn, standing by the

avenue--the same broad, muddy avenue down which I used to stroll. He was standing there in the rain, unable to take a step. His eyes were gone. He had an envelope in his hand and couldn't remember anything, as though he'd just awakened from a deep sleep. The day he'd vanished, he'd been playing alone beneath the plane trees along that avenue, shooting at sparrows with a bow he'd made himself. A big car had stopped, some foreigners had asked how to get to some street in the neighborhood, they'd asked him to get in and show them the way, and that was all he remembered.

The envelope contained eighty thousand pesseta bills.

X That's what those boys told me, excitedly interrupting ~~one~~^{each} another. Incredulous, I wanted to question the family immediately. They said they'd moved. They'd left without saying where they were going and hadn't been heard from since. The father was a drunk and a ~~Gypsy~~. The family had no source of income except the money the mother sometimes made as a cleaning woman. When I went to the eye bank to offer mine after my death, I told this strange story to the doctor who examined me. He looked at me pityingly, like everyone else I told it to. They didn't bother to hide their pitying looks. They shook their heads compassionately, but I hadn't made it up. Wasn't the fact that those people believed the story as atrocious as the story itself? They all believed it: that's what I'm a witness to, not the facts in the story. In what kind of cold, brutal world did those poor devils in the shantytown think they lived, beneath what invisible Moloch did they think they reproduced and multiplied, lived and died? Isn't that far more terrifying than the story: those poor souls' ability to invent and believe the most appalling tales?

Yes, the silence bred ridiculous rumors, as the dark breeds ghosts. Afterward, I heard another story about a priest whose tongue had been cut

out. How could I find out, in that oppressive silence, whether it was a legend or the truth? So many disgraceful events were hushed up, events all too real, that years later one wonders if they weren't bad dreams. Did I imagine that priest noiselessly opening and closing his mouth, staring at me? Those who will survive us perhaps will see him standing before an altar and then, when the bushel's been removed, ^{him} ~~the~~ light will shine forth; but right now I don't know if I saw or imagined him. He'd worked in another shantytown, perhaps the worst of them all, the one in the ^{Montjuïc} ~~Montjuïc~~ Cemetery where wretched shacks rise right on the edge of a vast potter's field. And they speak of the Church of silence! Haven't we all seen the Church ^{longue} ~~with its tongue out out~~?

#

The truth is that by that time I'd withdrawn into my own solitude and sadness, into a desolate sensation of utter uselessness . . . One day, a dozen seminarians showed up unexpectedly in my village.

Some of them were hardly more than children. They'd come to see "the sadly famous Cruells," the black sheep, because they wanted to be black sheep with me. They excitedly told me that behind them, behind the dozen who had come to visit me, stood many more, perhaps a hundred, but to me there was nothing new in that, my God, and while they excitedly told me about it I started weeping softly and said, "Don't forget, my children, those other horrors: those of thirty-six. You didn't live through them; I did."

And to their amazement, I started talking affectionately about our archbishop, so stupid, such a bumpkin, but so good-hearted. When he was no longer our archbishop, when he'd been undone by age, by his stroke, but especially by his forced retirement, I was often surprised at how much I missed him. But I could see the looks of disappointment ^{on} ~~in~~ the faces of

those poor babes who had gone up the mountain expecting to find a lion in his den and instead had found an old crybaby, because what else could I have been in their eyes?

X "We've had to witness so many horrors afflict this ~~unlucky~~^{cursed} world! And the Lord's silence sometimes seems like complicity, but didn't He Himself warn us? He Himself told us he wouldn't return till the last day. The mystery of iniquity began with Annas and Caiaphas; remember that, my children. Caiaphas was the 'high priest that year.' The mystery of iniquity began then and will ~~last~~^{endure} till the Last Judgment. The Lord is silent while the antichrist speaks, because truly the end of the world began in the moment Our Lord predicted, with the destruction of the Temple"--and as I spoke and wept the twelve seminarians looked at each other and shook their heads, but I continued--"Ever since then we've been witnessing the world's slow ending. Since then the antichrist has been the world, reincarnated time and time again, sometimes very close to its Vicar's canopied throne, and always 'speaking great things and blasphemies.' All these dark mysteries trouble us, my children, and rightly so. They trouble and even vex us to madness, and now you think I'm mad because I speak of them, but otherwise it's so hard to understand the mystery of iniquity! So hard! If You knew, Lord, how hard it is for us to understand You! Because the antichrist follows You as though he were Your shadow, and while You hold your peace he speaks, and You, You let him speak and rule the world. O Lord! How many atrocities the unlucky world has witnessed in this century murderous beyond all others! Yet You were silent! Because soon seventy years will have passed in this century of ours, this century I first encountered, my children, when it was the youngest of centuries, when it was new and wanted to change everything, to wipe out the injustices and stupidities of ~~all~~² other centuries. How much noise it's made,

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X this century we loved so dearly as our own: sound and fury signifying
nothing. How many great revolutions, how many great wars, all for justice
and a ~~happier~~ ^{better} future. And now look at it, almost seventy years old, this
paranoid century, and soon it will be nothing but a dying century and then
X a dead one and upon its corpse other innumerable centuries will settle like
~~mud settling~~ ^{silt} on the ocean floor through the milleniums, and who will
X remember our century? How many times, in future centuries, will bells
~~deliriously~~ ^{joyously} peal, calling men to arms against previous centuries and
announcing that the 'jour de gloire' is finally at hand, always another
'jour de gloire,' but what is really always at hand, my children, is the
most revolting butchery, Robespierre and Napoleon, Hitler and Stalin, the
guillotine and the gas chamber, death camps, an ocean of blood and shit .
.."

X Their disappointment was clearly written on their faces. They shrank
back silently, furtively glancing at one another, and I understood perfectly
X ~~well~~ ^I that these weren't the words they'd come to hear from my lips, but
in my boundless desolation I could utter no others.

X "My children, don't let yourselves be moved without knowing whose
hands move you. I could tell you about so many mysterious things that
only now can be glimpsed, so many things that weren't what they seemed
to be, so many double games, so much inconceivable duplicity, so many
unsuspected machinations . . . Don't let yourselves to be stirred without
X seeing who ~~is stirring~~ ^{stirs} you. In your innocence, don't become the instruments
of some dark force that will manipulate you!"--and now those poor kids
X listened more attentively--"Shun the black lie but also the red lie! ~~The lie~~ ^{Falsehoods}
rules this world and lies in wait for us in the most unexpected disguises!
X Truth is love, and thus can we always know it. Shun hatred, the father of
lies. Love ~~your country~~ ^{Catalonia} and liberty: love them with all your hearts and

souls. But whoever claims you must hate to serve them seeks to trick you.

2X Love is the light from above. This world would be nothing but a nightmare without this light, our only one, which comes from the mountaintop where ~~Màrius Torres~~ ^I said 'the tallest cross was planted.' ^{*} Come what may, keep your gazes fixed on that mountaintop with the cross. Or because Simon denied Him, shall we deny Him too? Because Judas betrayed Him, shall we betray Him too? My children, think of Demas and Mary Magdalene when you see the apostles betray Him, deny Him, or abandon Him. If you think of Demas and Mary Magdalene you will never betray, deny, or abandon Him."

#

The first of those demonstrations so many people misunderstood took place a few months later. May 11, 1966: at last a date I can remember. The only one after those monotonous years, all the same in my endless tunnel! That day I glimpsed a first crack of light, vague and distant, at the end of the tunnel.

X I found out almost by accident. It had been organized by--among others--those twelve who'd visited me in my village and who'd told the others I'd turned into a ~~nutty~~ ^I reactionary on whom they couldn't rely. I know that's what they said about me, but I don't hold it against them. After all, it might very well be the simple truth. Those poor kids could have added hopeless neurotic to ~~nutty~~ ^I reactionary, and they wouldn't have been far off. They didn't let me know what they were planning, but I heard about it through other channels.

And I showed up, to their surprise.

X It was shortly before midday on that Wednesday, May 11, 1966, in the cathedral cloister. A glorious spring day ^I that I'll always remember! How you revived my almost-dead hopes! Since that day I've again found

companionship and peace in the night sky, as I had before! And I've stopped feeling tormented by the incomprehensible monotony of so many galaxies. What can we know of Your creation? All we know is that it extends through endless space and countless centuries, unimaginable in its grandeur, which is a mere shadow of Yours. What companionship I find at night in Your creation, Lord, what companionship, ever since You again instilled hope in my heart!

It was a gorgeous spring day, and when I arrived a hundred cassocks could be seen. Most of them were very young, and those twelve were among them. They stared at me mistrustfully, and I could see they must have told the others because they all looked at me the same way. I didn't care. I joined them, and we went in and prayed to the Christ of Lepanto. In that huge, dark chapel where hundreds of torches and candles always burn, brought every day by anonymous hands, we knelt and prayed till the bells ~~chimed~~ ^{struck} at one. Then we returned to the cloister, and suddenly a ray of sunlight filtered through the ~~shiny~~ ^{glossy} leaves on one of those ancient magnolias and struck us as though in blessing, and one of them, one of the youngest, addressed us with such humility and meekness. "We are priests," he said. "Our mission is to preach, pray, offer, bless, and sacrifice ourselves for others. Every man is our brother. We must never hate anyone, though at times the mere sight of our cassocks arouses hostility. Truly, it would be too beautiful to be a priest if we were loved and respected by one and all . . ." That young man, whom I didn't know though I felt as though I'd known him forever--as though he ~~had been~~ ^{he was} my son!--went on speaking so fervently, so gently while everyone listened in silence. I had to make an effort not to cry. I didn't want them to see, God forbid, that I'm a hopeless neurotic ~~ravaged~~ ^{devastated} by sadness. I didn't want to seem like an old coward in those young priests' eyes! "Can anyone be

surprised," he continued, "that the path we've chosen is thorny? It would be surprising if it weren't. We have gathered today because we must tell our brothers in the police that they sin when they torture students and workers." Having uttered these last words, he was silent for a few seconds. Then he added, "Perhaps many will misunderstand what we're about to do. Certainly our brothers in the police will ~~not understand~~ ^{misunderstand} and will be angry, but if we do nothing, those students and workers, who are also our brothers, may think we do not love them too. A day will come when everyone will understand what we are about to do. We belong to the Church, and we must follow the teachings we have received from it and that we transmit to others in its name. It has taught us and we have told others that man was created in God's image. He therefore deserves respect. It is a great sin to insult a brother, spit in his face, ~~torture~~ ^{beat} him, and do worse things to force him to talk. Our brothers in the police sin gravely ^{when} ~~if~~ they do such things to students and workers, and we must tell them so. Perhaps we feel a little scared. This is not shameful. Jesus was also afraid in Gethsemane. Like Him, despite our fear we shall now do our duty. Let us pray for all our brothers--police, students, and workers--and that our meekness may be for all of them a light of peace in the love of Christ and the Church. May God help us. Amen."

Once these words had been spoken, we left the cloister and headed for the palace, which is so nearby. As the archbishop wasn't there, we left a letter with the vicar-general. Many of the priests who happened to be in the courtyard joined our group, along with quite a few friars and some monks. We were more than two hundred when we left that courtyard, walking in silence toward the Via Laietana. It was almost lunchtime, and the sidewalks were thronged with office workers. Everyone stopped and stared, because in truth we were a strange sight: all those cassocks

marching up the Via Laietana. Most of the priests we ran into joined us, and we walked along in pairs till we reached the police headquarters.

Two uniformed cops leapt from a jeep and barred our way. One of them yelled "What do you want?" while a crowd of curious onlookers gathered on the sidewalk across the street. The same young man who'd spoken in the cloister replied that we wanted to deliver a letter, but to the chief in person, and when he'd received us and we'd handed it to him, we'd go home in an orderly fashion. Before he'd even finished speaking, policemen began to pour out, some in uniform and others not, clubbing demonstrators and punching them in the face. Some priests fell to the ground, where the police started kicking them. We'd sworn, in the cloister, not to run whatever happened, and we kept our word. We stood our ground, letting them beat us while we offered no resistance. Meanwhile the Via Laietana had filled with people, since everyone had stopped to look, and the crowd spilled into the street, stopping traffic. Lots of people were also watching from windows and balconies. We crossed our arms and let them beat us, neither moving nor insulting them, as we'd agreed, but the crowd shouted indignantly.

At one point I was knocked to the ground and painfully rose to my feet again just in time to avoid a kick in the stomach. Unable to help it, I made an impatient gesture and knocked his cap off. Ashamed of myself, I yelled, "Let's retreat, brothers. Otherwise we'll lose our tempers." No one else had lost his. The cop beating one priest--and not one of the youngest ones--dropped his night stick, and the priest bent over, picked it up, and handed it back to him. Someone in our group shouted, "Let's head for the Jesuits!" because we'd agreed that if they dispersed us we'd regroup at the Jesuit ~~monastery~~ ^{church} on Casp Street. Since the police followed us, beating us as they went, our group split up, with some running up Jonqueres Street

X and others up the Via Laietana, and it really was a sight to see those
X ~~fleeing~~ ^{fluttering} cassocks ~~flutter~~ with the cops in hot pursuit. The onlookers'
X indignant shouts had now swelled to an immense ~~row~~ ^{row}. At the entrance to
the Jesuit church where we'd thought we could take refuge, we found a
crowd of policemen waiting. One of them clubbed me so hard on the head
that I staggered into the church, blinded by the blood pouring from my
wound.

X ~~9~~ This was the first of those demonstrations that would scandalize so
many Pharisees. Thank Heaven ~~by~~ ^{9A} Aunt Lúcia was already dead (may God
forgive her); otherwise, they'd have made her lose the little faith she had
left after the Council. As far as my archbishop was concerned, he visited
me in the hospital a few days later, as concerned as a father. The poor
man, who didn't have long to live, had grown fonder and fonder of me
over the years. But when, in response to his questions, I tried to explain
the cause of it all, he exclaimed, "My son, what they've told you can't be
true. I know for a fact that he receives Communion every day."

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X And nonetheless, You'd sent us that clearsighted saint, that brilliant
saint our century needed so badly. You'd sent him and placed him upon
your church's throne. We saw him with our own eyes and heard him with
our own ears, good Pope John, and the ice quickly melted, but soon You
snatched away the sun that melted it. Was Your church ^{unworthy of him?} Is it really
necessary to always fall back into the same old mistakes? Does the
mystery of iniquity have to last till Judgment Day, does the antichrist's
shadow have to fall on us till the Second Coming?

My archbishop had forbidden me to speak of these dark subjects that
troubled me more and more, of this enigmatic end of the world that never
actually comes but that nonetheless began, as You predicted, shortly after

Your death. In all fairness, I must add that he didn't forbid me on his own account but after meeting with some of the leading theologians whom he consulted on such matters. I'd even go so far as to say that at first, before he'd consulted them, when I'd begun talking to him about the end of the world and the antichrist, that he was shaken, that he wavered, that he was only a step away from being converted to my way of seeing things. I think toward the end of his life, the poor man was so tired of this world that the gladdest tidings you could have given him would have been its imminent demise. The theologians alarmed him, saying that although what I said was strictly speaking orthodox, it "smelled of heresy." Upset by the word "heresy," he ordered or rather implored me to speak of it no more and even make an effort not to think it. I obeyed him as long as he was our archbishop. Then he retired, and now he's been dead for many years. Are the orders of a dead archbishop valid? And besides, I only speak of it with myself, and when I spoke of it then, before his prohibition, with some of my colleagues, they shook their heads pityingly and glanced at each other, and I could read in their eyes what they thought of me. Well yes, I'm a neurotic. Who wouldn't be? Is there some commandment against being neurotic? Could I have been anything else after everything I've had to see and hear all these years? Lamonedá ranted on and on about his secret, that massacre confused in his mind with a moving forest of legs in black stockings, as though he didn't realize I was there. Who knows what that young man was like with his waxed mustache in the style of 1890, the one who wrote those passionate letters the bricklayer found almost eighty years later tied in a bundle with red thread in a crack in the attic wall . . . Yes, those yellowed letters, dated 1890 and 1891, left no doubts about the baby Lamonedá had been in illo tempore. He'd been born on December 17, 1891, shortly before his mother's

wedding. The letters spoke of that mustachioed Don Juan's infinite regret (there was a photograph with the letters) at being unable to marry her. "If I haven't told you until now," he declared, "if I hid the fact that I've been married for years in my native city in Estremadura, I swear before God that it wasn't out of any wish to deceive you by because of extremely weighty considerations that forced me to keep silent and that I still cannot reveal. One day you will know everything, and then you will forgive me . . ." The tenant spared no effort to try and identify the hero of that old love story. One of those crumbling letters was on police stationery (very odd, considering they were love letters), and the young Don Juan had signed them "Gumersindo." The only agent with that name in the 1890s, the tenant learned to his great regret, had died many years previously. The whole story was dead and buried, and how sad those stories can be when one stumbles across them decades later! It's not that he'd expected such a character to be alive after almost eighty years, but he'd hoped to find some clue, a few vestiges, something definite closer to the present. All his inquiries drew a blank. It seems this Gumersindo was an ordinary cop and it was impossible to find out anything beyond the fact that he'd died in 1925.

Needless to say, one mystery remained. Why had Lamonedá's father married her? Did he think the child was his? There was no other possible explanation, however perplexing the young woman's frivolous conduct (and she was Doctor Gallifa's sister!) might have been. There was another explanation, also hypothetically possible, but it would have been too sordid. For this very reason, of course, it was the tenant's preferred one: that Lamonedá's father, toward 1891, found his vast estates heavily mortgaged (perhaps because of the phylloxera that had attacked Catalonia's grapevines) and that Miss Gallifa offered him a dowry that was both in

cash and very large for the era . . .

"What my tenant doesn't know," Lamonedá told me, "is that an agent named Gumersindo, from Estremadura, worked with Baron de Koenig between 1914 and 1918. I delved deeply into the secret files at police headquarters on Baron de Koenig, our brilliant precursor . . ."

So he began talking again about Baron de Koenig, his greatest hero until he'd become aware of Himmler: that apparently false baron, a shady character who simultaneously belonged to the secret police and to equally secret terrorist groups he instigated to murder Catalan manufacturers in the name of class struggle, with the peculiarity that those gunned down always sold to the Allies, never to the German Reich. I remembered the fervent admiration with which he'd talked about Baron de Koenig way back before the war, our war, which was now growing as remote as the other in Baron de Koenig's time.

Whatever the story had been, Doctor Gallifa couldn't have been unaware that his sister had borne a child before her marriage, and since she'd been Gumersindo's fiancée (because this man had taken his vicious farce to the point of getting engaged, as was clear from his letters, and had only broken off the engagement when the pregnancy could no longer be concealed) he must have inevitably had some questions about who was the child's father. He never let on. She was his sister, and even if she hadn't been, charity would have sealed his lips forever. Lamonedá would never have suspected anything without that bundle of letters, which left no doubt. I think this unexpected discovery contributed to his final slide into madness.

He went on reciting those monotonous excerpts in which everything was tangled up: Duchess Atalanta and Monsignor Pinell de Bray, Marquise Brunhilda and Ambassador Recesvinto, Malvina Canals i González and that

locksmith who'd altruistically shared her with his buddies. Because now Malvina, whom he hadn't mentioned in a while, reappeared in his soliloquies mixed with endless excerpts from that insane novel he knew by heart. But now she'd turned into a Soviet agent sent to trap the great Recesvinto. He knew how to avoid all the pitfalls the enigmatic redheaded agent set for him and established once and for all that her name wasn't Malvina Canals i Gonzàlez but Olga Dmitrievna Putarov. And I thought of that bundle of dead, mummified letters and what the childhood of that old seventy-seven-year-old must have been like (since he'd been born in December 1891), the old man declaiming those delirious chapters in which I felt so lost. What a dismal childhood it must have been without a mother and with a father who perhaps had well founded doubts about whether he really was one . . . There was that other, illegitimate son whom he'd favored as much as he could in his will, leaving him half the income from his lands (how could he have foreseen that thirty years later, five hundred pessetes a month would be nothing?) and naming him his heir if his legitimate son died without descendents. Very probably it had been this other son, the illegitimate one, whom he'd loved. As for the legitimate one, how could he not have suspected something, given the circumstances of his birth? How dismal the poor devil's childhood must have been . . .

"Tell me, Cruells: are you nothing but a priest deep down inside?" he suddenly asked me. "That's what Soleràs was. He was that and nothing else."

"Soleràs?" I exclaimed. "Soleràs, a priest?"

"Yes, deep down inside he was nothing but a priest. You're very interested in Soleràs when deep down, he was nothing but a priest. He made fun of our principles, and especially he made fun of me! He was always baiting me. For example, I remember one night when we got drunk

together--something that often happened during the Battle of the Ebro--
 and he was needling me about the Miranda girl as usual. All of a sudden,
 he changed his tune and started trying to get on my nerves about my
 genealogy. 'What do you know for sure?' he asked. 'Listen,' I replied
 angrily, 'the Lamonedas' genealogy is scrupulously documented ever since
 the fifteenth century.' 'I wasn't asking about the Lamonedas' genealogy
 but about yours.' At that time no one suspected that in that crack in the
 attic wall was a bundle of letters tied together with red thread. It was
 unimaginable. For me, this discovery was like being struck by lightning.
 You can imagine how lovingly my tenant treats them, how he savors them
 in his free moments . . . He told me he wouldn't sell them to me for less
 than a million! At the time such a thing was so unthinkable that I hadn't
 a clue to what Soleràs was hinting at. 'In my case, my behavior's clearly
 due to genealogy, since everyone in my family's been off his rocker since
 the first Soleràs on record. My grandfather joined the ^{Grand} ~~Gran~~ Orient, and
 you know why? To annoy my aunt, who belonged to the Confraternity of
 the Holy Sepulcher. We'll let posterity decide which was loonier. My
 behavior's easily explained by my ancestors, but yours? The Lamonedas and
 the Gallifas, if I'm not mistaken, were landowners, solid patriarchs,
 sensible types nothing could shake. They might have been Carlists, and I
 bet they were. I won't argue about that, but what you are? Impossible!'
 X ~~He~~ Soleràs fascinates you, Cruells, but I assure you that he was a dangerous
 character, one of those spoilers who always screw up everything, red when
 everyone else is black and black when everyone else is red, a
 troublemaker! 'There are some fucked-up genealogies,' he told me that
 night in conclusion. 'If we could get to the bottom of them, they'd explain
 some people's mysterious behavior . . . ' Yes, that's what he said, 'fucked-
 X up genealogies,' because he was ^{always} ~~almost~~ trying to mortify me, and I had to

put up with it."

"What happened to Malvina?" I asked, interrupting him. "Did she finally leave you alone?"

"She wouldn't let me live! She wouldn't let me breathe! The latest was she offered to renounce her rights in exchange for a lump sum: half a million pessetes. Where did she think I was going to get them? That's what I asked for. If they'd given ^{them} ~~it~~ to me, I'd have kept my mouth shut for a good long time. They misunderstood. They thought I was threatening to broadcast their secret to the four winds when all I wanted was half a million to get Malvina Canals i Gonzàlez of my back and never have to think about her again. Maybe I got carried away. I gave them to understand that if they didn't cough up I'd go all the way, blab everything I knew! They decided it'd be cheaper to wipe me off the face of the earth . . . It's all because of ^{her} ~~that~~ Malvina, that redheaded whore!"

Till then, however strange it may seem, I ^{d'd gotten} ~~got~~ lost in his rants as in a fog full of vague, floating phantoms. How can I express the fascination I felt that night, one of the last; how can I find the words? He droned on and on as usual and I wept so softly that he couldn't hear me. And I wept because at last I knew who was beside me in the dark and why that hyena was hungrier than ever after thirty years of bitter humiliations and unsatiated greed. That freezing hyena was right there, curled up on his bed of straw, in the stinking darkness his ravings filled with obscene ghosts, his sole company. Because in his loneliness, he clung more and more fiercely to his novel. It was all he had left! It was mixed up with everything he told me, true or false. His voice at times would grow urgent and then muffled, as though an invisible hand were choking him, and then he'd resume his monotonous drone. Ah, Monsignor Pinell de Bray, bishop in partibus infidelium, ^{my} ~~my~~ Aunt Llúcia's illustrious oracle, you who deemed

yourself so subtle and clever: could you have guessed what was implicit in those "prior catastrophes we need to reestablish the kingdom of God"? I'd rather believe you were nothing more than a puppet moved by cold, invisible, distant hands; a puppet of another order, perhaps, but a puppet like Lamonedá. And Lamonedá kept on talking and the trunk's ambiguous contours grew clearer and clearer amid that fog of incoherence. It kept growing, and it was an enormous, outlandish object, a terrifying presence in a cave full of ghosts and cobwebs. ~~It~~ Now a cavalry colonel made his appearance amid that muddy torrent of words. At first I could hardly distinguish him from my relative Monsignor Pinell de Bray and Ambassador Recesvinto. How idiotic that endless novel could be, but now I listened, open-mouthed, as the mystery unfolded. O no, the mystery wasn't Llibert Milmany, who was no mystery to me and who had also entered the novel, appearing more and more often amid that tangle of intrigues and characters: "Llibert Milmany: there's a study for you! He was indispensable to us. He knew the rabble and the language with which to stir them; he possessed the key we lacked. Without him, we would have failed. We had to put up with him, ^{him} pay his weight in gold! He had only one condition: we had to open fire from some convent. A difficult condition in those times, dominated by the cardinal's evil influence!" And here my relative appeared again, along with his complicated intrigues to replace the cardinal. ~~My~~ Aunt Lluàcia's deceased cousin was now fully meshed with the plot as Duchess Atalanta's close friend and trusted advisor: "O, what an understanding friend, what an indulgent advisor." Lamonedá recited as monotonously as a machine, but a ~~broken~~ machine that sometimes got stuck and repeated the same sentence several times before moving on. "That spineless cardinal couldn't sense the grandeur of our imperial dreams. It was I, Count Recesvinto, who found the simple, brilliant

X solution. I and no one else! The colonel was a man without imagination, imbued with reactionary, ~~and~~ old-fashioned prejudices . . ." The machine got stuck, repeating "reactionary, old-fashioned, stupid prejudices" several times. Then it continued: "He never grasped what was going on. So much the better, since if he'd understood he would have refused, he would have refused, he would have refused," the machine repeated. "Our forces had been defeated, but we could still set off the long-awaited prior catastrophe if a ~~simple~~ ^{ignited} spark ~~lit~~ that powder keg, the anarchist rabble."

X As though tired from reciting so many long excerpts, the machine paused. There was a long silence in the darkness. I was near the door and he was curled up at the other end of the hut, half covered with straw. After that pause, he said in a changed voice, hoarse and plaintive, "It was after I read him this chapter that Soleràs exclaimed, 'I'd trade everything Stendhal and Eugeni d'Ors ever wrote for one page by you. What a pity I'm not a publisher! I'd beg you to let me publish it! We'd astound the world!' Yes, those were his exact words, that we'd astound the world if we could only publish this chapter . . . He was a jerk, but one can't deny that he had a fine feeling for literature. What a great critic that fool could have been! And this despite the fact that back then, the chapter ended here; it was incomplete. It still is. Whew, the work it'll take to finish it! Imagine: I want to outdo that famous passage about the Battle of Waterloo in The Red and the Black. My novel could have the same title. It's funny, but it would be much more apt than it was for Stendhal. All these weeks I've been planning this supreme chapter, where Recesvinto and his men, a handful of idealists, find themselves besieged by nineteenth-century, democratic-liberal, Judeo-Masonic forces. The police, the Civil Guard, and most of the army, led by the commanding officer in Catalonia, are against them: a handful of desperate and misunderstood men. Therein

lies their grandeur! That's when Recesvinto reveals his genius. When the others have given up hope and are talking about surrender, he and he alone plunges the banderilla into the bull! The colonel hadn't the slightest idea. He was a good egg who thought the whole world was like his village, where as soon as a regiment appears with a brass band, the good people come out to cheer. That Sunday morning he led his troops as far as the Diagonal, astonished to see all those empty balconies and shuttered windows despite the stifling July heat. That wall of hostile silence disconcerted him. But Recesvinto expected hostility from his compatriots. He knew them only too well! He knew they wouldn't appreciate the heroism of a minority imposing its ideas by brute force against everyone's will! He knew them only too well! But he also knew that the gentlest bull can be roused to fury by banderillas with firecrackers attached. This was the simple but brilliant idea conceived by Count Recesvinto, the future glory of imperial diplomacy! This chapter, the novel's climax, will take place in Parzelonenburg, imaginary capital of Subcarpathian Pomerania."

"Subcarpathian," I repeated, fascinated.

"Yes, Subcarpathian," he replied. "Subcarpathian Pomerania."

"Subcarpathian," I again repeated in a whisper. I wept softly but he didn't notice and it was as though a November cloud, swollen with rain, were floating inside my head while he went on telling me the plot of that chapter, his crowning achievement and the climax to his book, which would take place in Parzelonenburg, the capital of Subcarpathian Pomerania, and the darkness stank more than ever while I wept softly, curled up by the door, as though a November cloud were in my head, the kind that rains and rains and never stops, and then he said, "This chapter has to be a 'grand tableau d'histoire.' What a pity I won't be able to read it to Soleràs, who would have appreciated it so much! What a fool, but

what a great critic! He always advised me not to marry, like Stendhal. If I married, he predicted that I'd end up with the biggest pair of horns the world had seen in many centuries. 'Genuises like you and I,' he said, 'don't make good husbands.' Sometimes he'd also ask, 'How did you get to be such a genius, Lamonedá?' or 'Lamoneda, don't be such a genius!' The way he used to go on . . . What a pity I'll never be able to read him this chapter! I haven't written it yet, but I've got it all planned. I'll describe the colonel, dragging his two hundred soldiers through that bolted and shuttered city, unanimously hostile and uncomprehending; the steady, muffled clank of their sheathed bayonets against their canteens, the colonel's coughing. He was a little nervous; that's why he coughed. He couldn't understand a thing, because he was a complete outsider in Subcarpathian Pomerania, and moreover he'd never lived in a big city like Parzelonenburg. That silence, those shuttered windows, the sullen air with which the ~~big~~ city greeted us instead of the joyous cheers he'd expected because that would have been the reaction in his native village, a sleepy, one-horse town deep in the steppes of Baltic Transylvania . . . and suddenly bullets began raining down upon us: from balconies, from rooftops, from snipers behind trees! It was Subcarpathian Pomerania's autonomous police force; we could recognize them by their dark-blue uniforms. Some emerged from behind trees and flung themselves on the ground, where they continued firing. We began to hear machine guns we couldn't see. Some of our soldiers fell; others fled. The mules carrying our machine guns were startled by the gunfire. One bolted and galloped away; others collapsed and lay on their backs, kicking, with gaping wounds in their bellies. We had to creep forward from tree to tree and from street corner to street corner. The soldiers had come on foot, leaving their horses at the barracks and bringing only those mules. Now Count

X
2 X
X
Recesvinto realized that at least in this the colonel had made the right decision. Those rounds of fire would have ^{mowed} ~~mowed~~ down every horse in sight! Abandoning the mules loaded with machine guns, we retreated toward the monastery on the corner. The colonel was disheartened. Now he knew what Recesvinto had carefully concealed from him: that the civil guard was against us too. He'd seen their patent-leather hats gleaming ^{as} ~~at~~ ^{they came up marshaled up} ~~the bottom of~~ the Grazenstrasse. They advanced in formation with their usual impeccable discipline, ready, as always, to support the legitimate government. He was disheartened and spoke only of dying in battle to save his honor. Yes, this was the kind of drivel he talked! It was then that Recesvinto whispered something in his ear."

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X
At this point the machine jammed again, repeating as though it couldn't find the rest of the chapter. It stopped and repeated what he'd already said. ^{the} ~~As~~ though it had forgotten his novel, it began talking about Lamonedá, about his memories of that ^{stifling} ~~night of suffocating~~ heat, blood, and flames.

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X
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"He followed my suggestions without understanding them. I'd told him I was a confidential liason, and he had complete faith in me. I was wearing overalls, with a red and black kerchief around my neck. The colonel didn't realize these were the anarchist colors. He didn't realize anything, the innocent babe! I turned the tide when all seemed lost. I and no one else: Count Recesvinto! That idea was all mine! Only Atalanta still remembers; only she is still grateful. 'You won!' she stammers, ⁱⁿ ~~melting~~ with gratitude and admiration, because the colonel never would have had that brilliant idea. He was nothing but a fool, a soldier without imagination. ^{At} ~~In~~ that moment of supreme agony, the idiot thought only of his honor. Ashamed of dragging those two hundred poor devils into such a harebrained adventure, his only thought was to die fighting. They were

conscripts, almost all from the provinces of Jaén and Almería, and they'd followed him as Andalusians always follow whoever commands them: blindly, without asking where he was leading them. 'Poor ~~guys~~^{fellows},' the colonel muttered. 'I've led them to the slaughter~~house~~^{not}. I never imagined this would happen.' I could see he was so ashamed that I was scared he'd blow his brains out before I had a chance to make him take the decisive step. The friars had to open the door; otherwise we'd have beaten it down with our rifle butts. So what; isn't that what we'd planned, monsignor? 'The youngest of all revolutions is the revolution of the young!' But this worldly prelate smiled, listening to the duchess's confidences. He knew how to hedge his bets. When she told him it was I who'd beaten down the monastery door, he exclaimed, 'Only youth could make such a glorious revolution!' Well, monsignor, youth has its own requirements, and perhaps one day we'll get sick of pulling chestnuts out of the fire so worldly prelates, watching the bullfight from the stands, can have a grand old time! He hedged his bets! He pretended to be with us ('in spirit, naturally,' he always added) but all he cared about was wearing a cardinal's hat. They dangled it in front of him for years, but he never did get his ~~claws~~^{paws} on it, and in the meantime he'd turned his back on us and pretended not to know me. What had happened to all those flattering words he'd spoken to encourage us, Spain's valiant youth? Once the 'prior catastrophe' was over, he pretended not to know us. Those friars were scared out of their wits by the sight of all those machine guns. We'd salvaged some, taking them off the dead mules and dismantling them. What did you expect? Do you think you can rein in youth's gallant ardor? Days later, the duchess showed the count the black-and-blue marks those garters had ~~made~~^{left on} in her skin. She'd made a vow to Saint Pandulfa that she'd wear those too-tight garters for a whole week to mortify her flesh if the count succeeded in

provoking the much-desired prior catastrophe. Soon a rumor ran through the sprawling city of Parzelonenburg: 'The Carmelites opened fire on the crowd . . .' Behind the forces of public order besieging us, bands of ragged ruffians ~~soon~~ appeared wearing red and black kerchiefs, shouting and shaking their fists at us. Night was falling and there we were: trapped in that monastery. Bullets whistled through all the windows . . ."

Outside his hut, the pale, chilly dawn began to break, and the horizontal bar on that rusty iron cross was vaguely outlined like an arm frozen in some strange gesture. The madman spewed forth words and more words in a muddy, foamy torrent, "Those hypocrites promised us everything, everything! And all we got was shit! They put me out in the street, me, when they owe me everything! They slam doors in my face! All I have left is my novel and Atalanta!" and the machine repeated and repeated, going back to those black stockings. It shouted in a strangely hoarse voice, "Make way for youth!" but I'd stopped listening. I'd ~~quietly~~ risen from that rustling straw and very quietly tiptoed out, because now I knew everything.

I finally knew how Soleràs had died, "Soleràs was dangerous. What else could I do? I got rid of him . . ."

"Got rid of him . . ."

"What else could I do? I motioned to those two guys tailing us, and they did the job. They'd had lots of practice, that pair. I could count on them. It didn't take more than a minute. Anyway, what do you care about Soleràs when you hardly knew him. A very dangerous character . . ."

He couldn't see me from his end of the hut. I was trembling. That iron bar was there, frozen in its strange gesture, a gesture of complicity. The idea was there: solid, heavy, bulky. I heard him continue his rant, buzzing in the hut like a ~~bee~~ fly.

"They besieged us all night. They lobbed hand grenades through windows on the lower floors, and we had a lot of dead and wounded. The friars had locked themselves in the chapel. When the next day, Monday, was just breaking, a captain showed up to parley. The colonel refused to surrender even though he'd just had another disappointment. In addition to the police and civil guards, in the first light of dawn we clearly saw soldiers among those besieging us. So the army wasn't with us--or at least not all of it, as we'd led him to believe. Beyond the ring of uniformed men ~~encircling the monastery~~ ^{around}, we saw the crowd filling that broad avenue--the broadest in Parzelonenburg--and trucks kept arriving filled with anarchists chanting with raised fists. The indispensable Llibert Milmany had seen to that: another who pretends he never met me! They all wore red and black kerchiefs. At one point the colonel, who was peering at those trucks through his binoculars, put them down and stared at the kerchief I was wearing. He didn't say a word. He headed for the chapel, which was full of friars and our dead and wounded, and asked to confess and receive Communion."

"He's a fly." This unexpected idea popped into my head. I'd managed to slip out of the hut without his noticing, ~~and~~ ^{but} I could still hear him buzzing. "He's a fly as big as a man. He's hiding in this hole and keeps buzzing because he's a fly but it's winter, when there are no flies. This fly is a survivor: the only one of all those millions of flies that in thirty-six suddenly emerged from hidden eggs. I'd better hurry up and do something before he lays eggs himself. He could lay thousands of them and it would ~~all~~ ^{spread} over the face of the earth again . . ." And the fly went on buzzing in his hole; he was a fly and a robot that, with its machinery out of whack, kept on buzzing and buzzing endlessly: "Young Recesvinto was one of the glories of international diplomacy, but he liked

to travel incognito." He went on reciting in the dark, and everything got mixed up in the buzzing of that broken machine. And I touched that piece of rope. The pale, chilly sky was farther away than ever. It was no longer the sky: it was emptiness.

"He confessed and received Communion. Then he left the chapel and whispered to me, as though he didn't want the others to hear, 'I should have realized you were a Judas.' Then he addressed them; some of them had also confessed and received Communion. 'Now, my sons, all that's left is to die like men.' Because at that moment, the police and soldiers besieging us were preparing to attack since the deadline the captain had set for our surrender had passed. Before that final assault, a colonel from the civil guard appeared at the door waving a white flag. He'd come to warn us one last time to surrender. He and our colonel were the same age and knew each other. 'You have to be reasonable,' the civil guard said. 'This was an act of madness.' He was tired and had a three-day beard, but his uniform was impeccable and three big stars glittered on his cuffs. His hair was white. Our colonel replied that he'd surrender but on the condition that it was to him: that is, to the civil guard. The other led him to the window and pointed out an entire section of civil guards, all as neatly uniformed as he was, standing in formation in front of the monastery. At the sight of that section in perfect formation, our colonel hesitated no longer. He surrendered. When the doors opened and everyone, officers and conscripts, starting with the wounded, began filing out, Count Recesvinto appeared at a window as though he'd climbed the outside wall. He started waving his arms and shouting at the top of his lungs, making sure everyone saw his overalls and kerchief, 'Follow me, comrades!' The crowd instantly began pouring in, trampling each other and everything in its path. The lines of soldiers and civil guards had to give way before that

tidal wave, while the count kept screaming from the window, 'Death to the fascist friars!' Atalanta knows; she's never forgotten. She knows how much she owes me and that's why this duchess, a proud descendant of the Romanovs and Hohenstaufens, comes to kneel at my feet like a submissive slave who can refuse me nothing. And one of the friars was kneeling and howling, 'Have mercy!' while the anarchists massacred everyone in sight. One has to admit it: Llibert Milmany had kept his word. The colonel, who was bald and had lost his hat in the crush, tried to cover his head with his hands when the Engraver, a guy I knew well, went to bash him with the butt of a shotgun. There were quite a few women among them. One screamed, 'Castrate them alive! It's no fun once they're dead!' I saw one woman with a hammer finish off a friar who was already mortally wounded, crawling along on his knees clutching his belly. Others were in the chapel, which was still dark and shuttered, setting fire to some chairs they'd piled up. ^{At} While they were beating everyone they could lay their hands on, soldiers and friars, a gentleman in civilian clothing elbowed his way through the crowd. He was wearing a tie and jacket and an armband with the Catalan flag, 'I'm a delegate from the autonomous government. Stop! They've surrendered!' He shouted himself hoarse but no one paid any attention. Some policemen forced their way through the crowd with their rifle butts, ready to back him up, but I planted myself in front of that ridiculous character--yes, ridiculous in his tie and jacket--and shouted, 'You're nothing but a fascist!' The Engraver instantly took up the shout, 'That's right, a fascist! I saw you yesterday in the Plaça d'Espanya, firing at the crowd!' From then on, it was just one big ^{howl} ~~howl~~. They beat up that gentleman and the policemen surrounding him. They beat up everyone, while the fire spread from the chapel to the rest of the monastery and they lifted me onto their shoulders and carried me outside in triumph so

the crowd could cheer me . . ."

X The machine began repeating some monotonous passages from the novel again: "The imperial diplomatic service's leading light liked to breathe the air of storms; ~~but~~ ^I he preferred to travel incognito and to taste forbidden fruits . . ." And the sky had grown more distant than ever. It was no longer the sky but emptiness, and sweat trickled down my back because my fingers were trembling as they struggled to undo that knot. And suddenly he said in a changed voice, like someone brusquely awakening, "What time is it? What are you doing out there: saying your rosary? Bah, forget about that cross. It's nothing. Nothing exists."

There was silence. Then his voice whispered, "Or are you going to kill me?"

I didn't move. Suddenly he said, in an immensely disillusioned tone, "Nothing exists. Not even Duchess Atalanta."

A trembling drop of cold sweat trickled down my lower vertebrae like quicksilver. Then he growled these surprising words, "Only suffering exists."

I fell to my knees, exhausted. My hand clutched that iron cross. He screamed, "I only believe in suffering."

And then he started howling like a dog.

#

I was at the airport. On the horizon, like a fly, the plane disappeared, bearing Lluís and his family to the other side of the world. Earthbound, I still imagined that face, those bright eyes in which two tears had glistened as she'd given me her hand: two tears, only two, but so brilliant, like that other time at the "gala luncheon," now thirty years ago, my God! Those other tears had been for Soleràs, but these were for me. And You will forgive us because it's You who made us this way, Lord,

X ~~Y~~ you who made us great passionate sinners.

Lluís had embraced me at the last moment, and I hadn't noticed him slipping an envelope into the inside pocket in my cassock. I realized it when I was already on the bus. It contained ten thousand-pesseta bills. The bus still hadn't set out for my village. I got off and started walking toward Arc del Teatre Street.

#

X Thank you, Lluís, thank you! My God, I was drunk with joy. Tears rolled down my cheeks as I walked along. I saw places I hadn't entirely forgotten. I was looking for a certain shop in that labyrinth of filthy lanes: a pawnshop that was very vivid in my memory. I wept with joy, muttering "Thanks, Lluís" to myself while passersby stared at me, but I found my shop, which exhaled the same smell as ever: a smell of dank depths, like a cellar where mushrooms are cultivated. I bought a complete three-piece plaid suit, garish but wearable, an overcoat that was worn but warm, a thick scarf and the most indispensable underclothes. I spent more than three thousand, because I succumbed to temptation and bought my captain's spyglass ~~the one I'd had before.~~

X ~~Yes~~ Yes, I'd seen it weeks before, and it was mine. Who knows what ~~bizarre~~ paths it had traveled till it finally came to rest in that pawnshop thirty years later! It was mine; I'd recognized it from a mark I'd made myself when I was twelve in the brass on the first section. No one but I could have recognized it. That mark was supposed to ~~be~~ ^{depict} the clover, but so badly done; I'm so clumsy, Lord. It was my spyglass, the one through which Lluís and I had gazed at the heavens so many times back in the good old days. I'd discovered it weeks before, when I'd gone in that shop to ask the prices of used clothing. I'd left feeling very depressed, thinking I'd never be able to get hold of so much money . . . three thousand

pessetes! I'd gone there because I remembered that shop so well. I
 remembered it on account of all the bizarre stuff they had: telescopes for
 amateur stargazers (though I never thought I'd find mine!), old-fashioned
 enemas, weird orthopedic contraptions, huge barometers from the last
 century. My telescope, the only thing I missed from when I'd lived with
 my aunt! She'd given it to me on my twelfth birthday ^{to} as a reward ^{for} for my
 good grades. And now I had it again. I could look at Saturn's rings and
 Jupiter's moons as I had before, when I'd gotten so much pleasure from
 watching them change position from night to night, revolving like four
 peas around a plum; Venus, like a small moon, and Mars, so reddish . . .
 but now, I thought, thirty years later, Venus and Mars won't be such good
 company! ^{Before} At the time, Lord, ^{we'd} we all thought Venus and Mars were other
 worlds with seas and forests, animals and people, whereas now . . . Now
 we know they're two dreadful ^{hells:} ~~infernos~~: another dream our century has
 shattered forever, a dream three thousand years old, because Chaldean
 astrologers had imagined the stars were inhabited like other Earths! From
 those Chaldean astrologers down to us, when we raised our eyes
 heavenward we felt a kinship with other humanities sailing their worlds'
 seas as we sailed our own. Now we know Earth is oddly unique, humanity
 incomprehensibly alone . . . [¶] These were my thoughts as I walked along
 with that bundle of clothes under one arm and the telescope in my other
 hand, that telescope from my youth, lost right at the end of the war and
 rediscovered so unexpectedly. These were my thoughts, and it didn't occur
 to me that a priest who buys a three-piece suit in a pawnshop is bound to
 attract attention, and all the more if he buys a spyglass. I thought only of
 the planets and those two tears, unique and wondrous as the most distant
 stars. I also thought of the poor whore I'd stayed with in that same
 neighborhood so many years before. At every corner I was afraid I'd meet

her, because she'd recognized me despite the years and my cassock. I was scared I'd run into that poor harmless woman and thought only of this ridiculous danger, because she had recognized me when we'd met again in the most unexpected fashion.

X The first time I'd gotten off with a cracked skull and a few weeks in the hospital, where the archbishop visited me every day, reproving me like a concerned father. The second time, I ended up in the basement of that building on the Via Laietana. ~~You have to sleep~~ ^{don't you can avoid sleeping} on the cement floor if friends or family ~~don't~~ ^{you} bring a mattress. This right is enshrined in the jail's traditions, and it's amazing how the guards respect these traditions and the rights they confer on prisoners. There were six of us that time, and the news must have spread quickly because almost immediately six mattresses arrived--one for each of us--along with their respective blankets. There was another tradition we were unaware of, because we were newcomers, and that was the reason we met again unexpectedly after all those years. In the course of their nightly rounds, the cops sometimes arrest wretched whores peddling their wares too brazenly on street corners, since their trade is now illegal. They normally spend three days in jail, which is what the law allows, and then are set free till next time. No one gets upset or takes it very seriously, and normally no one remembers to take mattresses to those poor girls whose only crime is empty-headedness. To avoid sleeping on that cold, hard cement, they usually ask to share luckier prisoners' mattresses and blankets, and this is also part of the jail's traditions. The guards are good and understanding souls whom nothing could surprise. All they see is the humanitarian side of the matter and are content with a modest tip, also consecrated by the jail's traditions. So on our fourth night, we heard whispers and muffled laughter outside our cell. The door opened, and an old guard with a white, droopy

mustache that made him look like a retired Don Quixote explained very politely that "the girls are insisting on their rights."

"I can't refuse them," he explained apologetically. "You can say yes or no."

X Without awaiting our answer--how could we give one when we didn't know what he was talking about?--they burst in, pushing him aside and giggling. Apparently there ^{had} been a raid that night and they'd rounded up a good dozen of them. Seven or eight had already reached understandings with other prisoners, mostly swindlers and pickpockets (who always seem to have mattresses and blankets). The ones who'd entered couldn't stop laughing at the sight of our cassocks. Suddenly one of the six came up to me and stood there, staring at me open-mouthed and wide-eyed. She was the most whorish, heavily made up one in the group. She could have been fifty years or fifty centuries old. How could I have recognized her under that hideous mane of bright red hair and with those big blue circles around her eyes?

"It's you!" she finally said. "Since when are you a priest?"

And she started telling her friends the absurd but absolutely true story of those two weeks she, her pimp, her dog, and I had spent together. And the other priests, who were all very young, gaped at me in astonishment. Because in their eyes I was a venerable elder. Yes, at fifty that's what I was for them: a venerable elder, almost a martyr, and I told them with more sadness than shame, "My sons, everything this woman says is true."

"We always thought he was cracked," she went on explaining to her friends, touching her forehead, "but I never knew he was a priest! He skipped out on us, leaving the dead dog as a souvenir."

We gave them our cell and slept in theirs--there was no other

solution--on the condition that they not tell those who had so kindly sent those mattresses and blankets. Since they let them out long before us, we still got plenty of use out of them. And now I thought of her. I was sure she lived in a dump on one of those narrow streets, and I wouldn't have wanted to run into her for anything on earth.

I thought only of this ridiculous danger. Her eyes were the only ones I feared. The next day I arrived in my village with everything I'd bought, full of joy because now I could talk him into leaving, leaving forever, and I'd be alone and at peace again, because that strange neighbor who'd appeared out of nowhere, that strange neighbor who was Lamonedá, was a neighbor I not only couldn't love but whom I hated.

He revived at the sight of that manna from Heaven. He could already see himself in Paris and imagined some big-time editor almost fainting with excitement after reading his novel. "What luck!" he said. "No one's found my hideout. I've stayed here four months and you're the only one who knows. ^{What} ~~That~~'s luck!" He imagined himself a famous novelist in Paris with royalty checks raining down. He started talking about Parisian women, about ^{théâtres} ~~shows~~ à femmes nues": the only thing he could remember from a trip he'd made in his youth, a half century earlier, apparently the one time in his whole life that he'd been in Paris! He lovingly fingered the six remaining bills I'd given him to cover his travel and settling-in expenses till he found some way to make a living, and his crazy old man's face was older and crazier than ever. "Make way for youth!" he repeated, "Make way for youth!" And he muttered, "Now Malvina's going to lose track of me forever." Dawn was breaking. We decided he should spend that day in his hut and not set out till nightfall. He'd travel only at night till he'd crossed the Pyrenees.

A week had gone by. I assumed he was in France. One fine morning,

after Mass, I started walking to Mill Gorge. I'd done it so often at night, I knew the paths so well, that doing it by daylight was like a game for me. It took me less than three hours to get there. I'd gladly have brought my telescope ~~(since I'd gotten it back, it accompanied me on all my strolls, as it had before)~~, I'd have gladly carried it under my arm, but I'd lost it again. I'd lost it exactly a week earlier. Could I have left it on the bus's luggage rack on my last trip? The bus driver said he hadn't found it. A mystery! I'm so careless, Lord! But it wasn't the mislaid telescope that was bothering me; it was an obscure wish to see the place where I'd sweated with the strangest anguish I've ever felt, where I'd been about to succumb to the most irresistible and murderous temptation in my life. I wanted to savor that spot peacefully, without his presence.

#

He was still there.

He was there, sitting stiffly in the doorway. His skull was cracked open.

The horizontal bar from that iron cross was lying on the ground beside him.

The cold had preserved him, as though he'd just received the blow. He'd donned that three-piece, garish suit. He was leaning against the door, his eyes and mouth wide open, holding the novel on his knees.

#

We awake from our youth as from a night of delirious fever, and all of a sudden we're over the hill. How different is the landscape that unfolds before us on the other side; how different from the one we left behind ~~us~~! We start downward, filled with despair, feeling "nous étions nés pour quelque chose de mieux," to conquer the world! We were born for glory and glory's our goal, but not earthly glory.

Not this world's glory, which is mere vainglory; another, truer glory, but we can't achieve it through our own efforts. What can we achieve through our own efforts? Shameful and often terrifying falls . . . when we wake from that delirium, when we see clearly what we were capable of while it lasted . . . O Lord, what have we made of our youth? Why would we leave vain footprints in an endless desert's sands? Why would we want to live on in the memories of men who have none? Are we willing, in order to live in the memories of men, who have never remembered, to be erased from God's?

It's possible to be erased from God's memory and has been ever since the world began, though it's had different names. This exists, and since it exists it's good to face up to it from time to time. A man can spend his whole life with his eyes glazed, fixed on it, open-mouthed as though it had entranced him: this thing called nothingness, absurdity, emptiness, nausea and a thousand other names but that's always the same. And how many eyes are glazed! Because if one is not an immortal soul, if one is not God's creation, one is a robot whose glazed eyes are fixed on the absurd. The soul abdicates and becomes a robot. Then the robot breaks down, gets stuck; its gears turn in the void forever . . .

But though this exists, so does love. It would exist even if everyone denied it, even if everyone had always denied it everywhere! Absurdity's breath can't cloud the ^{heavens,} ~~sky~~. It doesn't rise high enough.

How many robots we've seen in this century! How many atrocities we've seen from one end of the earth to the other! And the robots would like all men to be nothing but identical robots saying and doing the same things. We'd end up unable to do anything that hadn't been done millions and millions of times by other robots. If we abandoned ourselves to automatism, how far could we fall? The fall is endless, since there's no

bottom. The jammed machinery falls and falls, its gears turning in the void. That man turned in the void, buzzing endlessly till a blow from an iron bar stopped him cold.

But I, in this mountain village where I live confined since my return from the Caribbean: haven't I also acted like a robot? All I did was rouse the villagers' instinctive distrust because my behavior toward them was ~~automatic~~ ^{mechanical}. I went from house to house talking about threshing, about beets, about sainfoin, talking the way a grown-up talks to little children. I tried to make friends with families that never attended church and the more I tried the more I was a robot because I did it out of duty rather than love, and without love one is nothing but a robot. Guinarda, that pious old widow who's spied on me and complained about me so many times to the archbishop: didn't she begin to mistrust me because I feigned interest in her problems? Her problems, which were such a pain! Since she and her husband had no children, he'd made a will that was pure gibberish. The poor old woman was in danger of finding herself in dire straits, because it could have been read as giving everything to his nieces and nephews ~~without any~~ ^{with no} allowance for her. With the best of intentions, I tried to intervene, since she's illiterate and got lost in that legal maze. I was wasting so much time trying to straighten out that tangled will--she concluded--because I hoped to get a big slice of it. She started getting suspicious. Then by chance she found out I was a "Red priest," and from that point on she suspected and complained about everything I did. If she'd simply written to the archbishop (or to be more precise, had others write since she doesn't know how): "You sent us a robot instead of a priest," she would have written the ~~simple~~ ^{plain} truth . . . And the others? The others aren't as malicious as Guinarda or at least conceal their malice better, but I could see in their faces how disagreeable they found my

faked, automatic concern, as disagreeable as when we address a child in baby talk he's too old for. Yes, that's the problem: why are priests so inclined to talk to laity as though we were grown-ups and they were children? There was also that old cripple who snuck away whenever he saw me. He didn't live in the village but in a farmhouse an hour away. Now the poor man's dead. It was hard for him to walk, as though his back were broken. Every time he saw me, he turned away as if the sight of my cassock horrified him. One day I found out they'd almost snapped his backbone in two with a blow from a rifle butt in a prison camp: precisely the one I'd been. Another day--I found out these things gradually--an old man who'd come to trust me told me that right after the war, in this village as in many others, a corporal would stand at the church door checking off the names of those at Mass and afterward called upon those he hadn't seen. And wasn't I, basically, a robot like that corporal?

Now that I no longer visit people's ^{homes,} ~~house~~, barely speak to them, and merely pray by myself and take solitary strolls with my telescope under my arm; now that I've decided to place everything on Your long-suffering shoulders, Lord: a burden that, useless as I am, was crushing me . . . now that I do nothing to attract them, they come! Because it's You, Lord, and not I who attract them, and You don't imitate our ^{babyish} ~~childish~~ dialect. You know how to address everyone in his secret, unique, honest and real language: the soul's native tongue!

I wander through the woods with my telescope tucked beneath my arm, leaving the sexton the job of ringing the angelus bells, because I like to hear them in the distance, the angelus bells, at that fascinating, twilight hour--and in the distance, I glimpse a radiant face emerging from God knows what abyss! Freed from hopes and fears, having placed the burden that crushed me on Your shoulders, I wander through fields and groves,

X hills and valleys all alone, but I glimpse that face above the sunset, a face of fire and thirst from which the whole earth separates me. It appears to me clearly, as in a very lucid dream. I don't know its name, and I weep in silence. Who are you: vanished perfume, forgotten melody, bright sadness that makes me weep; far-off face, who are you? The archangel departing or the one arriving? Fleeting life or approaching death? Why, nameless archangel, does a star shine on your brow; is it perhaps ^a ~~that~~ tear?

#

They've finally stopped bothering me about his death. It was that devout old biddy Guinarda, naturally, who told the police about my trips to Mill Gorge. They even gave me back those six bills, which were still in his inside pocket, which means the murderer's motive was certainly not robbery. I owe this happy ending to the Baroness of Olivet (she was made a baroness in 1945), always ready to use her influence to help Lluís and his friends. She's now an eighty-year-old lady. Her grandson, whose name is also Enrique, will inherit two baronies: Olivet de la Virgen and Castel de Olivo, since his father, that snot-nosed kid who used to run around with his little brother, in 1959 married the only daughter of the widowed Baroness of Castel and is in the process of joining the two baronies together in one marquisate.

She's now an eighty-year-old lady, in perfect health and very clearheaded. I appealed to her a number of times to stop irreparable catastrophes in the worst moments, the hardest years just after the war. She's grown very devout. She always asks after Lluís.

#

X The baroness can't do anything to help. I found out twenty years too late! ^{What could I have done} ~~How could I have helped~~ in any case? One of those groups of maquis I've mentioned was "Estany's gang." They hid in the thickest woods in the

Vall d'Aran, and at the time I often heard them spoken of without ever imagining Estany was him. That's where he'd been born and that's where he chose to die.

Every leader had a nom de guerre. I just found out that his, chosen in homage to science and badly pronounced by his men, wasn't Estany but Einstein.

De Gaulle had personally pinned a croix de guerre on him in 1945. Nothing would have been easier than returning to France, where he was a "compagnon de la Résistance."

In 1948, only six men remained of the two hundred who had crossed the mountains with him four years earlier. The priest in Ur, who just told me about it, spoke with him at the end of that autumn. He offered to take them into his rectory, where they'd be among Catalans.

"Our cause is just," Picó cut him off.

"It's not just because it's hopeless," the priest insisted. "Every man sacrificed in these circumstances is a murder."

"I won't surrender while there's a breath of life in me."

He made them pay dearly for that life. Since the priest in Ur had failed, the ~~civil~~ ~~guard~~ began closing in for the last time. His corpse cost them twelve.

He hadn't resigned himself to defeat, yet defeat is Your name, Lord!
 The only one You ever wanted in this world!

Have mercy on his soul.

VIII

January 26, 1969

Thirty years, my God . . .

And it all started on what looked like it was going to be a very peaceful Sunday . . . The warm air ~~waited~~ ^{drifted} through my wide-open bedroom window. My aunt had set out a couple of weeks earlier for her estate in Farena, where she usually spent ~~her~~ ^{the} summers. I'd always gone with her. This was the first year I felt too old--I was nineteen--to spend my summer vacation doing nothing. I'd decided to stay in Barcelona and study at the libraries. On weekends I'd take trips with other seminarians who'd stayed in town as I had.

I was alone in our house in Sarrià. The alarm clock rang. How happy I felt! It was still dark out. We were going to Montserrat.

It was that oppressive moment ~~on~~ ⁱⁿ hot, midsummer ~~days~~ ^{morning} when just before dawn the breeze from the mountains ~~dies down~~ ^{stops} and the one from the sea hasn't ~~started blowing~~ ^{started}; when sails in fishermen's villages hang limply, flaccid as the chest of a man whose lungs have given out. In front of the university, to my astonishment, I found a company ~~standing~~ ^{of soldiers} in formation, lined up along the main building.

The big clock in the tower, illumined, showed it wasn't yet four. Something weighed in the air, and it wasn't just that sultry calm. I stopped on the corner of Aribau Street. I'd come down from Sarrià, my heart pounding with joy as it did every time we visited that holy mountain. I could already smell the thyme and hear the choir singing. How light I felt. I was on my way to Montserrat, I was nineteen years old, and that Sunday had dawned so serenely. From my bedroom window I'd looked out at the city, stretching as far as the sea in the darkness. How

peacefully it slept, without a worry in the world.

Then I saw a company of police coming down Aribau Street. Like almost everyone else, I had no idea what was occurring. What was the meaning of those soldiers in formation, those policemen approaching? The still air seemed to grow thinner with their silence. They marched along wordlessly. All I could hear was their rhythmic tramping. When the police reached the square and saw the soldiers, their lieutenant squared his shoulders. So did the officer commanding the troops. Then the troops crossed the square toward Pelayo Street.

Suddenly a volley rang out.

I hid behind a tree. I couldn't make head or tail of it. Some police had fallen and were screaming. Others fired back with their shotguns. I wept behind my tree, hidden like someone pissing, while a deeper sound, cannons, came from farther away. Dawn was just beginning to break. I'd fallen asleep so peacefully the night before, so happy to think the next morning we'd visit Montserrat, and now I ran here and there, hungry for news, and how incoherent and contradictory it was! Some regiments had rebelled, but no one knew why. The police had subdued them. By midday, only a few pockets of resistance were left, cut off from each other and surrounded. The air force was getting ready to bomb the biggest one: the Drassanes Barracks. Those inside surrendered at eleven the next morning.

Those barracks no longer exist. In my memory, they'll exist forever! They were in an old, dilapidated building down by the harbor. A smell of mule sweat and rot seeped into the streets around it. Right next to those barracks, the used booksellers had their stalls. I often went on Sunday mornings, wandering from stall to stall, and some of them knew me. Shortly after my aunt had given me that telescope, I'd bought Camille Flammarion's Popular Astronomy. How voraciously I'd read that big,

illustrated volume till my aunt had taken it away and burned it. She'd just learned that in illo tempore Flammarion had been a leading spiritualist. A hundred soldiers, commanded by a lieutenant, were still holding out there. I found myself among the onlookers who jammed the lower part of the Rambla, down by the sea. Bombed by the air force, shelled by artillery, and besieged by the police, the lieutenant asked to surrender. We all saw the white flag. An officer and a few policemen entered. Soon they came back out and announced that those inside had lain down their arms and were waiting to be led away as prisoners. It was then that, as if by magic, all those men in red and black kerchiefs materialized. One climbed up to a window and, clutching the iron bars, with his free hand made gestures intended to be those of an unarmed hero assaulting a barracks--a barracks that had surrendered! He shouted and gesticulated. He was naked from the waist up and on his broad chest, shiny with sweat, I could make out a big tattoo of a woman clad only in stockings. His comrades replied with other shouts, shaking their clenched fists. At a certain moment, breaking through the lines of policemen, they all barged in together. We found out later that there'd been a massacre . . .

I remember those trucks speeding through the city, full of men chanting in unison. What was the meaning of all that uproar? Who were they; where had they come from? They spread their own legend. It was they who had won, unarmed and barehanded against machine guns and cannons. The stupidest legends are the ones we swallow most greedily, fools that we are, hungry for miracles. The anarchists, so scorned until then, became the heroes of the hour! Trucks roared past and people cheered. I myself cheered: I, who nonetheless had seen with my own eyes that the police and the police alone had crushed the rebellion. The legend was so irresistible. It was so lovely to believe in the Good Thief, the

X much-maligned anarchist who had saved our country . . . The pandemonium grew more and more insane. At night you saw nothing but trucks with red and black flags careening through the streets; those rhythmic chants drowned out everything. Barcelona was delirium and nothing but delirium, which started mixing with the more and more unbearable stench from the horses shot the day before, still strewn about the Plaça de Catalunya. But another stench began to be noticeable, this one more subtle, in that air heavy with smoke and dust: a mocking stench, like that of hidden carrion. At times it hit us like a cynical gust but then cautiously hid again. We began to glance at each other with mounting mistrust. What was the meaning of it all? Where were they trying to lead us? I hurried here and there, gulping, with a kind of asthma, the air that grew heavier by the hour. My sweat-soaked shirt clung to my back and I couldn't understand a thing but I was drunk; history makes us drunk. My memories are at once confused and precise. Everything was hot and murky, grandiose and horrible. My memory can't distinguish the dates, but certain details are very clear. That Monday evening or perhaps the next day we began seeing characters walking up and down the Rambla dressed as Gandhi, as the Negus, as the apostles. I saw the "anarchist Christ" everyone was chattering about. I'd never heard of him before. Later he gave those cloying, stupefyingly dull talks on the radio. He was very blond, with a long beard and hair down to his shoulders, wearing a white robe that made him look like a plaster Sacred Heart. The anarchists had assaulted prisons and insane asylums. They'd taken a scaffold with a garrote and dragged it into the Carrer Gran de Gràcia. There I saw it, a nuisance in the middle of the street. They'd hung a sign on it: "Here you see the instrument used by our class enemies to do away with our comrades." The garrote! It had scarcely been used for years, in extremely rare cases. I can only recall

X one time: a homosexual who'd hacked his lover to pieces with a carving knife, packed them in a crate, and shipped them by train. Only one time, in a case all Spain hung on for weeks and months. The king had been about to pardon him, and only pressure from the government and public opinion--appalled by the murder--forced him to let the execution take its course . . . In the name of abolishing the death penalty, the butchery would last for months and months! But we had no way of knowing it that evening, and all we felt was an enormous humming throughout the city that at times grew hushed and then it was like the airless silence that sometimes falls in the midst of storms. What strange rumors swept through the crowds! My memory's too fuzzy for me to be sure if it was Monday or Tuesday evening that they opened the prisons and insane asylums. What I do remember is that it was in the evening and someone told me on the Rambla down by the Drassanes Barracks, which were still smoking, while I was watching the "anarchist Christ" beneath the arch that gives Arc del Teatre Street its name, gazing languorously at the whores as he delivered an unctuous speech and they emerged from their lairs to stare at him in amazement. That evening, the Rambla was full of escaped convicts and lunatics, a foaming sea, and banners appeared like flags waved by shipwrecked sailors amid its turbulent waves. "Long live free love!" said one carried by women with shaved heads, dressed in men's clothes and armed with rifles. Free love! My God, they were so hideously ugly, and I asked one of them who'd given them those rifles. "We took them!": the same reply I got from a gang of kids between twelve and fifteen years old, and in downtown Barcelona you began to see wretches from shacks on the outskirts of town, poor devils without the slightest idea of anything whom they'd dressed up in those red and black kerchiefs just as they could have dressed them up as the opposite--that is, the same thing--the

X same ones who year after year we saw flocking to everything, always in a crowd, dressed in the same colors, always cheering enthusiastically. That Sunday afternoon, perhaps toward evening, the dreadful lie began to spread among them.

X By nightfall I was back at my aunt's house. Standing on the roof with my telescope, I watched all Barcelona's churches and monasteries burning at the same time. Scattered throughout the city, columns of black smoke rose toward the July sky, ^{which, red} glowing like the copper cover on a pot. While the flames very still crackling, roving bands of murderers fanned out through the city and Catalonia. Our victory, born legitimate, had turned into a bastard. It had fissured. A terrible confusion spread among us, united at first and now rent apart. The war, which perhaps we could have avoided and which at least we could have fought together as sons of the same fatherland, would now be a struggle between Cain and Abel.

What an old trick, old as the world! There were dozens, hundreds of them: all those flies who appeared at once and settled on everything. A certain Pep Put, a certain Engraver, a certain Quimet Solé were caught red-handed right at the start. It was child's play for them, climbing steeples and firing at passersby! That's all it took to make those poor devils from shantytowns believe the incredible rumors. What wouldn't they swallow when it comes to atrocities: nuns buried alive with their wrists chained together; fathers who sell their children's eyes to rich foreigners? When Quimet Solé, caught in the act, was executed, the anarchists raised hell. They swore he'd always been one of them. And really it was very simple; he had been one of them, but he'd been other things too . . . At first, it was still possible to sentence and execute Quimet Solé; later, the anarchist tidal wave poured over everything. Lamoneda managed to get out at the end of September. The country lived for seven months beneath a

red and black reign of terror. We knew it at the front, but we couldn't really imagine it. I'd joined up at the beginning of August, after spending a few weeks first as a blood donor and then as a nurse in Barcelona's hospitals. Once I reached the front, the rear seemed so far away, news reached us so late and was so fragmentary and nebulous . . . and our wish not to believe, or at least to believe it wasn't that bad, was so strong!

JAX But Lord, the ~~other one~~ ^{a murderer} did ~~just what I was going to do~~ ^{# exactly} ~~and there's~~ ^{d'been about} another odd detail: I found my telescope again. I found it behind the hut, among some brambles. That's how I got it back; once again, it accompanies me on my solitary strolls.

X Yes, it was there, a few steps from the corpse, this unlucky telescope I thought I'd lost again; and when I wake up at night, I feel an unbearable choking sensation. How incomprehensible it all is! I even doubt whether Lamonedá ever existed. Could I myself have created him in some dreadful nightmare?

X But if he really did exist, if he wasn't a ghost ^{he'd imagined} ~~of my imagination~~, how mysterious his death was! Because he died crucified.

He died by means of a cross; from a blow to the skull with an iron bar from a cross. And he was his nephew! Lord, Your grace sometimes works in devious ways. What do we know of the devious paths a big tree's roots follow underground? How could his uncle not have loved, if only out of pity, that motherless infant, perhaps despised by his father? How can I doubt that Doctor Gallifa at least felt compassion for the graceless child Lamonedá must have been. Who will ever know how it felt to be Lamonedá as a child, predestined not to love, bearing the mark of Cain?

Following the judge's orders, they've given me back those six bills found in the inside pocket of his plaid jacket. But they burned my fingers

because they were no longer mine; they belonged to Lamonedà! Now I feel better. I just used them to send a money order to that unfortunate prostitute (she gave me her address when we ran into each other so unexpectedly in jail). The poor thing must have a hard time now that her trade's illegal, incapable as she is of working at any other . . . At the time, I was surprised by her devotion to Saint Pancras, whom the pious pray to for health and work. It was a waste of time trying to explain that in her case it wasn't very appropriate. She was so stupid! The poor dear was so stupid! But she wasn't wicked. She bought a plaster statue of her saint with the money I'd given her, and every night she prayed to it at bedtime.

X What do we know of the devious paths a big tree's roots follow underground? Nothing! As we approach death--something we experience every second of our lives--our faith must grow if we don't want to be overwhelmed, because only faith, also called love and hope, is anti-death. Our faith must grow with our impending death, grow with our shadows as night approaches. Because what do we know about any of it: about faith, death, shadows, and night? What do we know about our faith and that of others? In the Almighty's eyes, faith in a plaster saint may be worth as much or more than that of the Church's most subtle doctors.

How astonished she was to recognize me among the priests in that cell! I never would have recognized her, the most tarted up of all those they'd dragged in that night. My companions stared at me in silence, shaking their heads. Without thinking what he was doing, one even touched his forehead, but since then they've forgiven my eccentricities. Compassion has opened their eyes. Ever since we shared that cell, they no longer look at me mistrustfully. They've grown fond of me. They're such good kids!

The night is immense but its countless galaxies no longer torment me now that I've regained my faith and hope. Now they again provide companionship, the same as before, infinity's companionship, which would be incomprehensible were it not Your doing: the unutterable companionship of millions of stars, our brothers since they too are Your creation.

Faith . . . Faith spreads by contact, like a flame! And that's all we know about it. A burning candle can light many that have been snuffed out. Jesus spread His flame to the apostles, who then spread it throughout the world. When, wandering down life's pathways, we find one of these candles lit by the original flame, its flame spreads to us if we don't draw away from the fire. There are lights that fill the night and scare off darkness. We saw one in our own time; his name was John and he was our pope. There are also small lamps, even humble wicks; tiny, barely perceptible night lights that nonetheless burn in hidden nooks, unknown to everyone.

Faith cannot be demonstrated; it spreads, like a flame. And that's what Doctor Gallifa was: a burning candle. Even now, after his death, he still lights other candles, snuffed out candles that seemed forever cold and dead. Couldn't he have lit that one at the last moment, just as the bar from the cross split his skull? What would I know about it? Does anyone understand these strange phenomena?

Because isn't belief in suffering the same as belief in the Cross?

#

And for those like me, unfit for anything else, there's no greater earthly glory than burning like an imperceptible night light in the depths of shoreless darkness, knowing full well the flame's not mine and that one breath can blow it out. Then . . .

How strongly we sense it at times: this darkness always about to

X
2X
open and engulf us! With a supreme effort, I manage to half wake myself
up in the ~~middle of the~~ ^{deadly} night, but then I fall back into a deep sleep. All
my life I've suffered from bad dreams! I used to wake up ashamed of
having had them, monstrous or murderous visions. Now . . . I'm alone;
terrifyingly alone. Strange as it may seem, Lamonedá kept me company.

X
The last company I'll have in this world! Because the old archbishop's
dead; all I have left on earth are Lluís's and Trini's occasional visits.
When I see friendly faces in my tunnel, where I'm just beginning to
glimpse a faint light ~~at the other end~~, they're faces of the young, who
can't understand anything I've lived and suffered through: friendly faces to
be sure, but they look at me and shake their heads when I ask what
unexpected landscape will suddenly appear before our dazzled eyes at the
other end. Will horror once again await us: horror with other slogans, but
still horror?

X
X
O, if that earthly ~~homeland~~ ^{nation} would appear, like an inkling of the
Heavenly one! Truly ~~innocent~~ ^{childish} dreams, but so deeply rooted in our hearts .
. . . To rediscover our country and freedom, like someone who rediscovers
his grandparents' house after years wandering lost and without a roof over
his head! At times I believe in it; past hopes return like birds returning to
forgotten nests. The embers still glow beneath the ~~huge pile~~ ^{enormous heap} of ashes.

X
Lluís . . . I've seen him transfigured, that Lluís one would have
thought was blind to all faith. His eyes regained their youthful sparkle as
he breathed in that air; nothing more than a breath of air, and the embers
burst into flames . . . He and she were in Barcelona, and what very few
realize is that my archbishop, unresigned to no longer being one and
devastated by his forced retirement, wanted to see me every day so I
could keep him informed, and it was he who encouraged us the most.
"Don't back down, my children!" He'd lived among us so long that he'd

ended up feeling as Catalan as anyone. "Outsiders will never be able to understand us," he'd say in Castilian. And what no one knows is that he suggested that watchword so many would take up, "We want Catalan bishops!" Yes, that's what he thought he was after living among us so many years. He'd forgotten that when he'd first arrived, some twenty-five years earlier, he'd thought Catalan and heresy were one and the same! The crowd had gathered on that broad, luxurious avenue, in front of that convent, also full of nuns from other parts of Spain and where the intruder had chosen to live. Banners with these three words fluttered above thousands of heads as the mounted police began charging with drawn sabers and we all started singing Verdaguer's hymn to the Virgin Mary. I was with Lluís and Trini. How brightly their eyes shone, Lluís's as much as Trini's! His voice boomed out; he seemed transfigured. He was twenty years old again! When, with his head still bandaged, he boarded the plane that would take him to the other hemisphere, deported as an undesirable alien, he embraced me and said, "I'll return, Cruells! From now on I'll come more often! I'll get my citizenship back so I can come whenever I like. Next time they can jail me but not deport me!" And his eyes and voice made me feel he'd been resurrected.

X But as for me . . . For me it may be too late. By the time we get to the other ^{end} ~~side~~, something will have died in me forever. Those seminarians have grown very fond of me. They forgive me for being a worn-out old man; a neurotic, cranky reactionary. The poor kids forgive everything. It's not that they look upon me as a father. Heavens no! They look upon me as a grandfather! A grandfather who's in his dotage but who was a hero in his youth--way back in ancient history!--and who's grown old honorably. They flock around me and love me. They're such good kids! Why should I disillusion them by saying my youth wasn't heroic and in particular that

there's nothing honorable about my old age. It wouldn't be right for a grandfather to disappoint his grandchildren, but often I can't understand their language. At times it's as though I heard them from a distance, on the other shore, perhaps in another world. I look and listen to them with more love than they realize; grandchildren never realize how much their grandparents love them. They're engrossed in their games, in which their worn-out old grandfather can't take part. That's what life is like. Because that's what I am in their eyes at the age of fifty-five: a worn-out old man, shaky on his pins. "He's over the hill now," they say, "but when he was young he fought in the war from the first day to the last." That's what those fifteen-year-old seminarians say, since they don't know much about my life and see everything through rose-colored glasses. And knowing what they say, I'm ashamed of having aged so much, of being thirty years older than my age!

Who could ever take away these thirty extra years?

And sometimes I'd like to put them on guard against the rosy illusions one has at fifteen, because those poor children seem to trust so naively in their countrymen's virtues and in the pure light of the "jour de gloire" they expect to see . . . They have so little inkling of those other horrors, that other nightmare. When they sometimes think of martyrdom, it's such a clean, simple, unambiguous martyrdom!

X Lord: ~~save~~ ^{rid} us once and for all of vainglory. In truth, it would be too beautiful to die simply for one's country, justice, or liberty! It would be too beautiful to be a soldier who dies in a just war without the slightest misunderstanding. What new trap awaits us? What new fire will burn Rome? Won't the flies return in the heat of another summer? Who knows if we'll have to accept not only death--it would be too sweet if it were only for You--but infamy; didn't they crucify You for blasphemy, Lord?

Annas and Caiaphas drowned out all other voices, the Church of noise crushed the Church whose tongue had been cut out. Will they again hunt us down like animals with the plague, like rabid dogs?

I ran here and there amid smoking buildings and crackling rifles, shouting, "It's a lie!" but my hoarse voice was lost amid the roaring flood. They'd already spread the lie: that friars had fired on the crowd! And I shouted, "That's a lie!" and my voice was like a wounded man's death rattle beneath a pile of corpses. The monstrous lie that set loose that bloodthirsty pack of dogs!

Lord, at the other end may we see peace, love, brotherhood, our Catalan nation, and freedom. Grant us at least a glimpse of that forever-promised land! But if this is not Your will, and since You let Yourself be crucified for blasphemy, cannot we also accept infamy with death? Lord, take from me this anguish that at times chokes me, the same one that made your ancient prophet ask, "Sang?"

For what purpose will my blood be shed?"

Mihi absit gloriari nisi in Cruce Domini Nostri Iesuchristi.